

HARLEQUIN ROMANCE



**WORLD
PREMIERE
EDITION**

**MAURA
McGIVENY**

His Lordship



HIS LORDSHIP

Maura McGiveny

Jason Caine had jilted Kristen in one simple, devastating telephone call. The pain was so incredible that she couldn't believe it; she had to go to him, to hear from his own lips that he no longer loved her. Jason did better than that - he introduced her to his wife. Kristen had to escape to Pennsylvania, where she had grown up and been happy. But even with the love of her Aunt Martha and the friendship of widower David Tremain to comfort her bruised heart, how could she possibly forget Jason? And how could she relax when the man they all called 'His Lordship' seemed to have taken control of the farm that was her refuge?

CHAPTER ONE

KRISTEN set the phone down with slow deliberate movements. Her face was absolutely white as she stared straight ahead, waiting for Jason's voice to stop vibrating in her ears.

In the next room the happy noises of a birthday party rose and swelled. Some of the children were laughing, some were crying and everyone was talking at once. All five of her brothers had come home this weekend, with their wives and children, and the house was crammed wall-to-wall with people. This was the first time in months they were all together again. She saw her mother's flushed face, her ecstatic smile, the dainty corsage pinned to her new dress and Kristen knew she couldn't do anything to ruin it for her. She'd have to go back and smile and pretend she was having a great time when all she wanted to do was go somewhere and lick her wounds in private.

Now is not the time to dwell on it, she told herself. She had known it was coming. It shouldn't have been any surprise. She lifted her chin and pinned on her brightest smile and took a deep breath before rejoining her family.

More than an hour later she was still smiling for all she was worth, but it was getting more and more difficult to control the incredulous, helpless hurt that had begun with Jason's telephone call. She wished she could cry. The tears were there behind her eyes but so was Jason's handsome face, and it was as if he was watching her, daring her to crumble.

She remembered the faint haughtiness that would steal across his features sometimes when he was deep in thought and unaware of her eyes on him. She pictured him that way now and somehow it set a spark to her pride. He was a handsome devil and some of his

unconscious arrogance must have rubbed off on her during their short time together because she squared her shoulders and refused to give in to the weakness of tears.

When Ricky, the youngest of her nephews, tripped over a bright red toy truck and started to cry, she automatically gathered him close in her arms and murmured soothingly, rocking him until the tears stopped. Several of the other little ones crowded around her and clamoured for attention.

'Come on, kids,' her twin brother Rob, a tall thin man with a bright shock of blond hair, got down on his hands and knees on the floor. 'I'll be a horse. Get on my back and I'll take you for a ride.' He grinned up at Kris. 'You haven't got a big enough lap for all of them.'

She laughed, setting Ricky on his feet and dropped to her hands and knees too. 'Get on, Ricky, and you, too, Jenny. We'll race Uncle Rob.'

They pawed the carpet and snorted and had a hilarious half an hour riding the children around the cluttered living room before collapsing in a laughing heap.

'Again! Again!' they cried, but Kristen put her hands up in surrender, laughing helplessly.

'This old horse isn't as young as she used to be. It's time for 'Old Krissy' to take a rest in the pasture.'

'And it's time for all these little cowboys and cowgirls to get ready for bed,' Rob's wife, Janet, said with a grin.

In a surprisingly short time, the house was restored to order while the children, all eleven of them, were being settled by their

mothers in makeshift cots in the big rooms upstairs. The dinner dishes had been done and now her brothers were gathered around the television set discussing the merits of their favourite baseball teams. Kristen saw her mother and father thumbing through an old photograph album before she quietly slipped out the back door.

It was blissfully peaceful here in the huge backyard with its gently sloping lawn and fragrant border of wild flowers. Crickets were softly chirping and somewhere in the distance a dog was barking. She made her way to a small tree and lifted her arms to one fragrant branch and in that moment, everything she had put out of her mind came rushing back.

She gripped the smooth bark and tried to remember the feeling of comfort she had always found there. When she was very young, this had been her haven where she could escape her brothers' unmerciful teasing. They were all older than she, even Rob her twin, and they often joked that when she fell in love, her husband-to-be would have to have their hard-won approval before they would let her marry.

There was no question of that now. All she could see ahead was loneliness, a deep yawning chasm of it, and there was nothing she could do to change it.

'Would it help to talk about it, Kris?' Rob's deep voice was gentle.

She stiffened and dropped her arms without looking at him. 'I didn't hear you come out.'

'You've been trying to put on a good front, but I don't think you've really heard anything for the past hour and a half, have you?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'You know I'd never pry.' He came around the tree and stood in front of her. 'I saw you answer the phone and couldn't help noticing your face when you came back to join us. If you want to talk about it, I'd be glad to listen.'

She bit her lip, thankful that the deepening dusk masked her expression. Maybe it was because he was her twin or maybe he was just more observant than her other brothers, but he always knew when something was really wrong. 'It was Jason,' she said brightly.

Rob didn't say anything.

'He called to say goodbye. He's been here for a week and he's going home tomorrow. He said he couldn't be in Los Angeles and hot ring.'

'He's not going to come and see you before he goes?'

She shook her head and leaned back against the tree, resolutely keeping her chin lifted. The tears were all too ready but she blinked them back. 'He said there was no need to come.'

'But why? I thought he was going to come back and marry you!'

'So did I,' she said miserably.

'You mean he ended it over the phone?' His face was incredulous. 'Somehow I'd have thought he'd have more class. That's not like him, Kris. Did he say why he quit writing to you for so long? *Or why* you couldn't get in touch with him?'

'No. He just said that while he was in Cornwall he had had a lot of time to think and—and he had come to the conclusion that we'd be better off not seeing each other again. Two different worlds and all

that.' She turned her back, hunching her shoulders. It was getting more and more difficult to talk without sobbing. Even in front of Rob, who would understand, she didn't want to break down. If she did, she might never stop crying again.

She still couldn't understand why this should be such a shock to her. Something had been wrong for a long time now. But if only he hadn't chosen this way to end it. One simple, devastating phone call. No preamble, no small talk, nothing to prepare her. Her mind reeled. She had always thought of him as so kind. He was a decisive person but he told her his rough edges had been worn smooth with time like the jagged rocks on the coast near his home in Cornwall. There was no smoothness now. 'It's over,' he had said roughly. 'I won't be seeing you again.'

And then the line had gone dead.

'I'm sorry, Kris,' Rob whispered gently, before putting his arm around her and turning her burning face into his chest. 'I know how much he meant to you.'

She was silent for a long time then a deep sigh shuddered through her. 'Do you believe in love at first sight, Rob?'

'I knew the first time I saw Janet she was something very special,' he said with quiet understanding. 'I don't know if you could say that was love or if it was just an attraction that developed into it.'

'I knew I loved Jason. From the first time I met him on the beach. And he loved me. We didn't say anything right away but we both knew. A lot of times we didn't have to say a word. It was as if we could walk around in each other's minds. You know what I mean?'

He gripped her shoulders hard and looked down at her colourless face. 'What you two had was something really rare. That's why I

can't see how he can end it over the telephone this way. And how can you let him? I'd have thought you'd want to fight for him or at least find out what's behind this sudden change of heart.'

'How? He said he didn't want to see me again.'

'Go anyway! Talk to him. Find out what's wrong. Fight for him, Kris. Isn't he worth it?' He jammed his hands into his pockets and his face darkened. 'There has to be a reason for this uncharacteristic behaviour. If you really care, you'll find out what it is.'

'How do you fight for a man who doesn't want you any more?'

'If you give up without trying, you'll always wonder what was really wrong. Maybe it's just some simple misunderstanding. Isn't it worth a try?'

She looked at him for a moment, weighing what he said. It was what he would do, she knew. 'Do you think he's staying at the Ambassador?'

His smile was full of satisfaction. 'Probably. It's where he stayed the last time he was in town. I'll make a quick phone call and find out for sure.' He squeezed her hand. 'It'll take at least an hour for all the kids to settle down. We won't be missed. I'll let Janet know and she can tell Mum and Dad we've gone out for a while. I'll meet you in the driveway in five minutes.' With a grin, he was gone and she had no time to change her mind.

Maybe he was right. Maybe it was just a misunderstanding. But then again, she might not want to hear what Jason had to say. All during the ride to town she wavered between hope and fear.

When Rob dropped her off in front of the hotel, she gave him a strained smile and he returned a thumbs-up salute. 'I'll find a place to park then hang around the lobby for a while. If you don't come down in half an hour, I'll know you two have patched things up and I'll make myself scarce. Good luck.'

'Thanks, Rob. I have a feeling I'm going to need it.'

'That's no way to talk.' He grinned in reassurance. 'Just seeing him again will turn everything around. You'll see.'

A young helpful receptionist gave her Jason's room number and she stood for a long time in the empty corridor outside his door before getting up enough courage to knock. Her heart pounded so fast and so hard she thought it must echo all along the silent hallway, but she forced herself to tap loudly before she lost all her nerve and left without seeing him.

There was no answer and for a moment it crossed her mind that he might have gone out, but then she heard his muffled voice: 'The door's open.'

Summoning all her courage, she clenched her jaw and stepped inside, her eyes skittering around the wide austere room before coming to rest on him.

Kristen noticed a jerking spasm shoot through him when Jason recognised her, then he sat with rigid stiffness in a dark green velvet chair. He didn't stand when she took several hesitant steps towards him. Her feet sank in the thick off-white carpet making her steps jerky and awkward so that she had to stop abruptly and stay where she was. With a curious breathlessness she searched his face for some sign of gladness to see her, if not a welcoming smile, but there was none. Only a thick thundering scowl met her pleading eyes.

He's changed, she thought.

He was dressed in black slacks and the whiteness of his shirt, open almost to his waist, made his usually tanned skin look sallow and unhealthy. But even so, he still had the power to set her heart racing just by being in the same room with her. His thick black hair was longer than she remembered. Now it brushed the collar of his shirt and for a second the word 'unkempt' flashed through her mind, but then she realised he must have been raking his hands through it. He was thinner and his mouth was drawn in a tight grim line, drawing her attention to the stark fine-boned gauntness of his cheeks and his unusually deep-set grey eyes that were full of a stormy surprise that startled her.

'What are you doing here, Kris?' He threw his head back with a distant haughtiness and his vibrant voice lashed at her like a whip. It was as if he couldn't believe she was actually there.

Her mouth and throat were suddenly dry and she shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Distinct pain flickered across her colourless face and all her carefully composed poise shattered at finding him so near yet still so far away. 'I had to come. How could you just ring and say it's over?'

'I thought I made myself clear. I didn't want to see you again. Why did you have to come?' He didn't move. His hands were at his sides, looking suddenly lifeless against the green velvet upholstery.

She floundered, staring at him. 'Why? Oh, Jason—'

'God!' he said harshly, 'there's nothing more to say.'

She was totally bewildered, unable to understand his cold remoteness. This wasn't the same man she had left at the airport a

few months ago. Some haughty stranger had come to take his place. The Jason Caine she knew was tender and gentle and loving for all his solid rangy bulk. Now he was so thin and cold and fierce with strangely glittering eyes full of anger that made her recoil instinctively.

'I don't want you here!'

'Please!' The strap of her shoulder-bag was being mangled by her numb fingers. 'What happened to change you so much? Have you been sick?'

'Nothing happened and I've never been better. Get out of my life, Kris. Just get out of my life.'

She flinched as if he had actually struck her. 'I'm sorry if—there's been some misunderstanding. If it's something I said—or did—'

'Don't apologise,' he said coldly. 'It's nothing you did. I just don't want you here. Can't you get that through your head?'

'No! You don't mean that.' Gulping at her own audacity, Kristen bolted across the room and dropped to her knees in front of him, staring at him with the pain stark in her eyes. 'Have you forgotten what we meant to each other? I love you. Whatever it is, we can talk it out and make it right between us.'

Jason faced her grimly, not moving from his chair. He didn't touch her but neither did he make any move to step away from her. He merely sat as if frozen to immobility. It was as if all his warm flesh and blood had turned to marble, except that his jutting jaw was tightly clenched and his nostrils flared with anger and the fierce glitter of his eyes scorched her with a relentless blaze of repudiation. Surely a marble statue couldn't be so frightening? A

ragged pulse was leaping at the base of his throat and that alone gave her a sliver of courage.

'There has to be a reason for this change in you. What happened in the last six months to change it all? Your letters stopped and mine were returned. I couldn't reach you on the telephone. Why?' Kristen's heart banged against her ribs, but ignoring the tremendous risk of humiliating rejection, she twined her arms around him, burying her face in his neck.

His skin was warm and the thick silkiness of his hair tickled her nose, filling her with the scent of all the wild windswept coasts of Cornwall. This familiar closeness after so many months apart broke down the last of her composure. 'Oh, Jason,' she murmured mindlessly against his neck, 'I love you! I'll never ever stop no matter what.'

She heard him give a muffled groan before his arms came right around her to hold her tightly to him, but in a shattering split-second he roughly gripped her shoulders and drew her up so that her face was only inches away from his.

'Kristen,' he said with ominous calm, 'it's over. I don't want to hurt you. If you leave now, you won't get hurt.'

She tried to steady her harsh, ragged breathing but it was impossible. '*Why?*' she cried through stiff lips, her fingers unconsciously curling and digging into his chest where his shirt was unbuttoned. 'Did you forget you asked me to marry you before you left? I thought you loved me!'

For an instant she was sure she glimpsed a searing flash of pain that mirrored her own anguish, but then his eyes burned into hers. 'We come from two totally different worlds. It never would have worked. Just accept that it's over,' he muttered thickly. Then he

was very still, his face like hard marble, pale and cold and lifeless. His fingers loosened their deathlike grip on her shoulders, and she sagged clumsily to the floor at his feet.

Before she had time to pick herself up, the door opened and a small slender girl about her own age came into the room without knocking, carrying several bulky packages. Her hair was a mass of red-gold curls framing an exceptionally lovely face. Kristen saw at once how the slim skirt and matching blazer of some expensive navy , blue material highlighted her flawless complexion and glorious hair.

Startled at finding Kristen kneeling in a heap on the floor at Jason's feet, the girl turned questioning dark eyes on her which widened with apprehension when they rested on the man's stricken face.

No one uttered a sound and for an hysterical moment Kristen thought how stupid she must look to this girl, how hot and dishevelled as if she had been running hard. She was flushed and out of breath. Pushing herself to her feet, she smoothed the sides of her dark green slacks with hands that shook uncontrollably. Was no one going to say anything? She looked accusingly at Jason and an unreasoning anger swept over her. Why didn't he say something? Why didn't he do something? Why didn't he *move*?

'I'm glad you're back, Emma,' he finally said in a clear deep voice, vibrating with a strength so at odds with this tense atmosphere. 'Now you can meet Kristen, the girl I told you about.' He didn't move when the girl named Emma set her packages on a chair and crossed the room with a light step. 'Emma, this is Kristen Thorne,' he introduced them. 'Kris,' he looked at her steadily, 'this is Emma, my wife.'

All the colour drained from Kristen's face and she caught her breath harshly, staring at him with disbelieving shock. All at once his hair gleamed with blue-black fire in the lamplight. His shirt became a white blur against the wide bony expanse of his shoulders and his harsh -grey eyes glittered strangely in his white face.

My wife. Just like that. *My wife!*

The room spun. She could feel her mouth working but no words passed her stiff lips. She felt as if she had just been punched in the stomach. All her breath was knocked from her lungs. She reeled with a pain so intense she wanted to die. Sudden tears spurted at the backs of her eyes and only sheer force of will kept them from streaming down her face. Something inside her was screaming, it isn't true! Tell me it isn't! It mustn't be!

A sob rose in her throat but she managed to sink her teeth into her bottom lip and stifle it. She was horrified at this sudden sense of calamity so completely overwhelming her. She had been so trusting, so ready to fall in love with this handsome devastating man. And he had taken advantage of that naivety. He was only amusing himself at her expense after all. He must have had a good laugh at her stupidity, waiting all these months for him to come back and marry her. What a diversion she must have been for him—a man already married.

She looked at him through a stinging shimmer of tears, but his rigid features kept dancing meaninglessly before her eyes. Her hands clenched so tightly each knuckle gleamed with a white brilliance against her even whiter skin.

From some unsuspected well of courage deep inside her, she found her composure. Somehow she must manage to leave this room

without breaking down completely. That would be the final humiliation. She couldn't let him see how much he had hurt her, and she grabbed at that thought, clinging desperately to her pride. With her head tilted to a regal angle, she forced her numb legs to carry her to the door. She knew she had to get out of there as far and as fast as she could because she wouldn't allow him the final satisfaction of seeing her make any more of a fool of herself. Without a word, without a backward glance, she closed the door in silence behind her and somehow made her way through the lobby and out into the cool concealing anonymity of the busy street.

'Hey, Kris!' Rob leaped over a chair and pushed his way through a bustling crowd of people just coming into the bright lobby. 'Where are you going?' he shouted.

She had already reached the corner when he caught up with her and gripped her elbow, turning her towards him. 'God, you look like-death. What happened?'

'Take me home, Rob. Please, just take me home,' she whispered brokenly.

The rest of the weekend passed in a hazy blur. Her family knew, of course, and had been silently sympathetic. She was aware of a closeness, a sense of protection and caring from them and she was grateful. Later, she wondered what Rob had told them but, at the time, she was relieved that she didn't have to give any explanations. What could she say really? A hot sense of humiliation engulfed her and she wanted only to forget what a fool she had made of herself.

But all that summer she could only remember Jason Caine; things they had done, small bits of conversation they had shared, promises that had meant absolutely nothing. And then she pictured

him the last time she had seen him—so still and cold and lifeless. How could he do it? she asked herself day after day. What did he get out of it? Why? But there were no answers. He was gone, lost to her. She would never see him again.

In an effort to pick up the frayed threads of her life, she went to the rehabilitation clinic where she worked as an aide and purposely volunteered longer than usual hours with the hope that she would come home dead tired and be able to sleep. Her parents realised what she was doing but they carefully avoided commenting on it. If they noticed the faint purple circles under her eyes or the deepening hollows in her cheeks, they tried to ignore them, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to watch her bottle everything up inside, without trying to help.

On a cool crisp autumn night when Kristen let herself in the back door, she found her father sitting at the kitchen table in his robe and pyjamas with a black scowl on his face.

'Hi, Dad. You're up late,' she said with a careful smile and an attempt at breeziness that only increased his irritation.

He lifted his grey head to look at the wall clock and ignored her greeting. 'Do you realise it's nearly midnight? Your mother says you missed your supper again and I won't believe you've been at the clinic all this time.'

'I wasn't.' She sighed and hung her jacket on a peg just inside the door. 'I was walking—thinking.'

'At this time of night?' he exploded. 'It's cold out there and it's starting to rain.'

She hunched her shoulders and went to the refrigerator. 'Would you like a cup of cocoa?'

He pushed his empty mug across the table. 'I've already had one while I was waiting for you. I don't suppose another would hurt.' His troubled eyes scanned her back as she busied herself at the stove and a helpless rage struck at him when he noticed the thinness of her shoulders through the soft material of her sweater. 'This has got to stop, Kris.'

She looked up with a frown. 'It's not really that late, Daddy. You stopped waiting up for me a long time ago.'

'That's not what I'm talking about and you know it. Jason Caine has been out of your life for months now—even longer if you'll admit it. But he's still got some kind of hold on you.'

'Please.' Her voice shook and she turned stiffly back to the pan of milk on the stove. 'I'd rather not talk about it.'

'You have to face it,' he snapped harshly. 'If you look at it rationally, you'll find all kinds of flaws in your relationship with him. How long did you know him before he told you he had to leave for his father's funeral in Cornwall? Three weeks? A month? Hardly enough time to fall in love with a man.'

'Time is relative. You can know more about some people in a month than you can of others in years.'

'But you didn't know anything about him.' His lip curled when he accepted the mug from her shaking hands, but he steeled himself to ignore the intense look of pain that flashed across her face. 'You never knew the things that really mattered, Kris. Did he ever mention his wife waiting back home? And what about children? Does he have a daughter? One who might grow up to remind him of you? Or a son?'

'Don't, daddy, please don't!' All her defences were crumbling. In another minute she'd be sobbing. Even as she looked at him, the tears started to trickle down her face and she couldn't stop them.

'I have to for your own good,' he said softly.

Standing, softly gathering her into his arms, letting her bury her face in his chest, he rocked her gently. 'Oh Kristy,' his deep voice reflected her pain, 'he isn't the man for you. Some day you'll find someone else. He didn't really care for you or he couldn't have hurt you the way he did. You've got to let him go.'

'I love him,' she sobbed bitterly. 'I know it's wrong to love a married man and I've tried not to be so stupid, but I can't help it.'

'There, there, darling.' He patted her back and sighed deeply. 'You're not stupid. We don't always love the right person for the right reason and it's not something we can turn on and off at will. If it was that simple there'd never be any spice in our lives. But the way I see it, you have a choice.'

She took a shaky uncertain breath. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'It's simple, really. You can take this experience and let it taint the rest of your life, making you a bitter woman, distrustful of all other men, or you can learn from it.' He smoothed her hair and loosened his hold on her. 'You won't forget Jason Caine and you can't crush all the memories of what you thought you shared with him. The harder you try, the stronger they'll get. You already know that, I'm sure. This isn't something you fight. If you do, you'll end up broken. It'll destroy you. You don't have to suppress your emotions but you can master them. Accept that you loved the wrong man and then go on about the business of living. It will resolve itself.'

'Do you really think so?' Panic threaded her husky voice.

'Believe me, Kristy, love is a terrible emotion. Anyone who tells you it isn't fierce and strong and able to turn your life upside-down has never really « been in love. But it has many facets and you've just seen one of them. I'm only sorry it had to be one of the harsher ones. Some day you'll find a man who'll offer you a different kind of love, but you've got to let this one go first.'

She knew he was right. Up until now she had been fooling herself, still keeping a flicker of hope burning deep in her heart that somehow something would change and she would find herself together again with Jason as if they had never parted. But it was a futile hope.

She blinked back the hot tears burning the backs of her eyes and felt deeply ashamed of her stupidity, of her unwillingness to face the inevitable, of trying to hold on to something that was never hers to begin with. Gradually the stiffness went out of her body and she relaxed against her father's tall bulky frame and was held tightly in the warm secure comfort of his arms.

Slow minutes passed as they stood together in the warm dimness of the kitchen and when she lifted her head her face was flushed with the beginnings of determination.

'That's the Kristen I used to know,' he smiled gently, putting his hand under her chin to lift her face up to him. 'You've taken the first step. The rest will come if you go away for a while.'

'Away?' She swallowed.

'Your mother and I are going on that cruise you and your brothers arranged for us and I don't think you should be on your own here. It's not that I don't think you're capable, after all you're twenty-one now, but you need a change of scenery, some place where every little thing doesn't hold a memory of Jason. Your Aunt Martha

rang this morning from Pennsylvania and I feel it's a godsend. She needs your help. I told her I'd ask you.'

'But how can I help her? She keeps her farm running like clockwork. I'd probably put a spanner in the works like I did when I was six and got my leg caught in her tractor.'

He smiled gently, glad that time was behind them. 'I think you've got a healthy respect for tractors now, so don't worry. She needs you in another way. Remember David Tremain? They've got a bumper crop of soyabeans this year and David's kept pretty busy. She needs your help to care for his son.'

Kristen's eyes narrowed with mock suspicion. 'Are you sure you didn't ring Aunt Martha and ask if there was anything I could do?'

'What a suspicious mind you have. Now why would I do that?' His face was a study in surprised innocence.

'It's all a little too pat, Daddy. David Tremain just happens to be tall, dark and handsome—and too young to be a widower. Isn't it a little obvious that all of a sudden Aunt Martha needs some help with his son?'

'Not at all. Martha's gone and got herself a job as a housekeeper and can't spend as much time as she'd like with the boy. Being four, he does need supervision. And besides, I understand David's blond, not dark. And in the picture I saw of him, I didn't think he was particularly handsome.'

'But you think he's sufficiently good looking enough to take my mind off Jason?'

He put both his hands on her shoulders and smiled. 'Do you think he could?'

'I don't want him to.'

'As long as you feel that way, he won't. Don't try to see him as a replacement for Jason Caine. This is just the beginning of another part of your life. If something develops between you and him, well . . . that won't be all bad, will it?'

Her eyes flashed a brilliant green and she had to smile in spite of herself. 'I never thought of you as a matchmaker before.'

'You're wounding me, dear. If I'd been trying to matchmake, you'd have been all trussed up with David and you wouldn't have realised I'd had a hand in it.' He gripped her shoulders hard. 'Don't think of this as running away to start a new life. That house was your home for the first six years of your life and there's healing there you won't find here. No one there will know what's happened unless you tell them about it. You have a proud independent streak underneath all your quiet ways which has taken a beating lately, but I know you'll find it again. Keep that determined chin up and trust me to know what's best for my daughter.'

She breathed in deeply and put her hands tightly over his. 'I hope you're right, Daddy. I hope you're right.'

Running away never solved anything, she knew, but this was going to be something different. She had faced her humiliation and now she would forget it. She was going home to the place where she was born, to a different way of life. In one sense she was starting over but in another she was continuing on. The past was behind her now. She would never forget Jason Caine, but he would have his own place relegated to the back of her mind, and he would stay there.

CHAPTER TWO

A LIGHT rain was falling when Kristen's plane landed in Pennsylvania. She considered it a good omen. It rained whenever anything good happened to her.

She had no trouble finding the right train to take her to her aunt's farm in Lancaster in the southeastern part of the state and only after she settled herself in the seat, determined to enjoy the changing landscape flashing by her window, did she remember it had been raining when she first met Jason.

He was the only other person she knew who loved to walk in all kinds of weather. The beach where they met had been an empty rainswept stretch of sand, but it was the most beautiful spot in the world to her. The two of them had haunted the place all the time he had been in California. And it was there, in a driving downpour, that he had asked her to marry him . . .

She blinked her eyes fiercely, dragging herself back to the present, and forced her concentration on the lush rolling farms outside her window. She wouldn't think of him. He had no place here.

Huge undulating patches of green and gold and brown earth formed shallow pastures and meadows where cattle grazed in contented stillness. In one drenched field, a young farmer, dressed in old-fashioned dark clothes and sporting a long black beard, stood by a fence as if in silent communion with the elements. Pleasant looking farmhouses were scattered across the panoramic vista with their immense scarlet barns and silos. Some were decorated with brightly painted geometric designs of a star or lily or tulip within a circle. She knew these were 'hex' signs belonging to the Amish or Pennsylvania Dutch as they were called. They were a religious people whose ancestors had come from Germany

two hundred years before, and their lifestyle today was much the same as it had been then.

For the first time in months, Kristen found herself looking outside her own small sphere. She was able to turn away from her painful brush with love and wonder about the people who lived in these houses, what they did, what was important to them and what their lives were like. Just as with many of the tourists who came there each year, the quaint lifestyle of the Amish caught Kristen's fancy too. They were an anomaly in a modern world, spurning the trappings of civilisation yet amazingly thriving and prosperous without using power tools or machinery or conveniences of any kind.

She settled back in her seat and relaxed completely. Her father was right. There was a timelessness about this part of the country and a healing she wouldn't find anywhere else.

When she stepped off the train, she scanned the thin crowd without finding a familiar face. There were several horse-drawn buggies with bearded Amish men in wide-brimmed black hats patiently waiting in the parking lot next to motorcycles and sportscars. She smiled at the incongruity. The Amish lived here in great numbers, keeping to themselves generally, yet they were seen everywhere.

A very short rotund woman with curly grey hair suddenly separated herself from a small group of people and came forward. 'Good heavens, my dear, have I changed so much you don't recognise me?'

Kristen blinked. 'Aunt Martha?'

The woman nodded and smiled warmly up at her with blue eyes that sparkled with merriment. 'I knew it was you from the pictures your mother's been sending all these years. But you're so much

taller than I expected,' she chuckled. 'Fifteen years it's been since you've come home.'

'And you're so much shorter,' Kristen laughed. 'I remember having to reach up such a long way to hug you.' Now she bent down and did just that. 'It's so good to be here. Thank you for letting me come.'

'It's your home, child,' she said, a little flustered. She let her niece link her arm through hers as they made their way to her car. 'I thought you'd be able to stay awhile?' Deftly stowing one small case in the back of her little station wagon, she looked up enquiringly.

'Don't let the case fool you. I never was one for clothes—especially with my leg. I live mostly in jeans and sweaters, but there's a dress in there, too, so don't worry that I'll embarrass you.'

'As if you could,' she grinned. 'We live simply here and jeans and sweaters are just fine.'

They talked easily while Martha Townsend carefully negotiated her car past a horse-drawn black buggy and left the bustling town behind them. Kristen brought her up to date on all the latest buds on the family tree and Martha needed no prompting to heap praise on her hired hand's efficient management of her farm.

They were driving through a drenched emerald countryside slowly surrendering to autumn's vivid palette. Vibrant red and gold trees blazed on brown grain-stubbed fields, and Kristen sighed contentedly.

'Tired, dear?' Martha smiled, reaching out to pat her shoulder. 'For a time there you were quite a world traveller, weren't you? In all

those different hospitals. I always felt so guilty since it was our tractor that hurt you. But your leg is all right now, isn't it?

'It's fine,' she reassured her. 'I'm just like new again but I intend to stay away from tractors, if you don't mind. Are you worried I won't be able to help you with David's little boy?'

'Not at all, dear. He's well behaved. You won't have any trouble with him. I just wish I could say the same about his lordship.'

Kristen's eyebrows rose in a question.

'Didn't I write your parents about him? I'm sure I must have. He's turned my life upside-down.'

'Is he the man you keep house for?'

She nodded. 'He bought the house at the bottom of the ravine last year and for some reason he took a liking to me. When he finished restoring it, he asked me to be his housekeeper.'

'You mean that big old manor that was falling apart? The one Daddy always had to drag me away from?'

'You remember that, do you?'

'I used to dream I'd live there some day and play the part of a grand lady.' She sighed theatrically. 'I'd always look at it from my window and spend hours weaving daydreams about what I'd do if it was my home.' She blushed at the memory. 'Such fantastic dreams for a six-year-old.'

'Not at all, dear. You never know where dreams will lead you. But you should see the house now.' She shifted gears and turned on to a well-travelled dirt road. 'His lordship rebuilt the crumbling walls

and tore out all the overgrown weeds and dead trees and suddenly it didn't look so derelict any more. It's a regular showplace now. He even has fish in the stream and horses in the stable.'

'He must be quite something, titled and living in his mansion. How does he fit in with all the rest of the neighbours?'

'I don't know if he's really a lord or not. As far as I know, it's just a pet name somebody gave him because he's from some place in England. Quite a chuckle he had when he first heard it, but a more down-to-earth man you'll never see. Even the Amish, who don't believe in living in wealthy splendour, have a great admiration and respect for him.' She let out a sigh and deftly avoided a large pothole in the road. 'He's got such a terrible burden to carry now, poor man. He used to be so open and friendly to everyone, but since he was badly injured in an accident he's become a bit peculiar.'

'In what way?' Kristen asked, fascinated.

'Well, he's become a recluse. He's in a wheelchair, you see, and can't bear to think people pity him. He absolutely refuses to see any of his friends and gets positively livid if anyone even comes near his home.'

'But he still lets you keep house for him?'

'He was quite upset when I told him I had other obligations. David's my hired hand but he's like a son to me. I offered to find another housekeeper for him, but he wouldn't hear of it.'

'What about his wife?' Her eyes twinkled with mischief. 'Surely she must be a little bit jealous at his possessiveness?'

'Oh no, dear.' She was quite serious. 'He isn't married. A proper bachelor, he is.'

'Oho!' She was openly teasing now. 'He's probably thinking of making you her ladyship one of these days. That's why he's refused everyone but you.'

'What on earth are you thinking? Good heavens, the man is thirty years old at the outside. I'm past sixty.'

'Oh.' She was immediately contrite. 'When you said "his lordship" I naturally pictured a short, stout, grey-haired gentleman with a huge dog fawning at his heels.'

Martha turned the car on to a road that was little more than a rutted track. 'He has a dog, all right, a Labrador. And come to think of it, he does fawn.' She sighed. 'The poor man has to have something he can count on. It was rumoured he was going to marry but I suppose with his accident and all, the girl didn't want to be saddled with a crippled husband. Too bad, really. He came home in a terrible temper and dismissed most of his staff. Now there's only James, the gardener, and Alan, the stablehand, and me. James doubles as his valet now and then.'

'I guess Daddy was right when he said you had your hands full.'

'Oh yes, dear. I'm so grateful you came. With you caring for Stevie, I'll be able to spend more time with his lordship and not feel I'm letting David down. He's such a dear. But you'll find that out for yourself.'

They passed through a tidy, mended gateway and Kristen's eager gaze followed the irregular line of picturesque outbuildings in the near distance. A large stable, several small sheds, wire pens and a

huge barn brought back many memories of long, lazy summer days spent trailing after her brothers.

When Martha let the car roll to a stop in front of a sturdy stone farmhouse half hidden under a wild tangle of late blooming rosebushes, she turned in her seat. 'Well? Has it changed much?'

Jason Caine had no place here. There was not one thing to remind her of what a fool she had been. A full-blown smile lit up her face and she couldn't hold back a chuckle. 'I'm home.'

'I was hoping you'd feel that way,' Martha grinned. 'Come along. You've heard all about David. It's time you met him.'

Kristen followed her plump figure into the house and immediately an aura of cozy warmth welcomed her. The front door opened straight into a living room with arched oak beams on the high ceiling. Directly ahead of her, at the far end of the room an open stone fireplace was set in a hollowed-out wall with a small cheery fire burning in the grate that separated this room from the dining room. The glowing light flickered and danced on the polished knotted floor strewn with rugs in a variety of subtle earth tones.

The furniture looked to be constructed of rugged wood that had a dark hand-rubbed finish and was fitted with plump cushions, again in earth tones. There was a long sofa, two armchairs and several footstools arranged at strategic points to make the most of the crackling fire. A rough-hewn end table held a brass lamp as its only ornament. Six-deep bookshelves flanked the fireplace and a narrow doorway next to them led into a dining room, again fitted with a rough, highly polished table and chairs.

The faint odour of beeswax mingled with the warmth coming from the fireplace and Kristen smiled delightedly. 'Even after all your

letters, I wasn't prepared for such a lovely room. I don't remember it like this at all.'

'That's because David's been remodelling it for me. He's dismantled a few walls to make the rooms larger and opened the fireplace to heat two rooms instead of one. The bookshelves are his idea, too. And the mullioned windows are a work of art, wouldn't you say?'

'They're fantastic.'

'He made the furniture himself and gave it to me last year when his wife died. You should have seen him, poor man. He was a lost soul when I offered him a home here, but then he got himself together again and took right over and now I don't know how I got along without him.'

A sudden sound of giggling from upstairs made Kristen lift her head and listen. 'Stevie?'

'Oh dear.' Martha bustled to the stairs. 'David must be getting him ready for bed. I didn't think it would take me this long to get back from the station. He still has the milking to do. He shouldn't have bothered with Stevie's bath. Leave your case and come up to meet the family. I'll have David bring it up later.'

The family turned out to be one very small boy, one large shaggy sheepdog and one tall man. They were having a pillow fight in the middle of a wide bed and all she could see were arms and legs and pillows and quilts massed together amid shrieks of noisy laughter.

The dog spotted her first and dashed towards her, setting up an ear-splitting barking that scared the wits out of her and made her back away until she felt the bedroom wall cool against her back.

'Down, Shaggy!' Martha admonished him before turning to Kristen, holding the dog by his collar. 'He's not really ferocious.'

She gave an uncertain smile. 'If you say so.' She hesitated then gingerly reached down to scratch the thick white fur behind his ears.

The barking immediately stopped and his tail wagged furiously.

'You see?' Martha straightened and turned, beaming at the little boy now standing so stiff and silent beside his bed. 'Stevie, I'd like you to meet my niece, Kristen Thorne.'

The boy didn't speak until his father rose from the bed and stood beside him, his hand resting lightly on his shoulder. 'Where are you manners, son?' he said gently.

'How do you do?' His sandy head dipped shyly in her direction before he held out a stiff hand. His eyes were brightly blue and wary and didn't quite conceal his mistrust.

'I'm pleased to meet you, Steve,' she smiled, shaking his hand with all the formality his rigid stance demanded.

Then she swung her face up to David Tremain. He was tall and broad and the plaid shirt he wore was frayed and much washed as were his jeans. His lips curved upwards in an impersonal smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, before he extended his hand to her.

'So you came, Miss Thorne. I thought you would, eventually.' His voice was exceptionally quiet and that surprised her. She expected it to be deep and booming because he was such a big man. But more surprising was the lilting inflection he gave each word. It seared through her, catching her unawares.'

'You're *British?*' she choked, immediately swamped with a devastating sense of loss. Jason was British too. Jason spoke in the same beautiful way.

Martha stared at her stunned white face for a moment then smiled, a little flustered. 'I've grown so used to hearing his accent, I never thought to mention it.'

David took her hand in his firm grasp and something came and went in his eyes. 'I'm Welsh, actually, but I grew up in Cornwall.'

A painful pang ran through her. Jason lived in Cornwall now.

'David worked at the manor for a time,' Martha added, 'before his lordship came home and dismissed everybody. What the poor man doesn't realise is, his loss was my gain. I don't know what I'd do without my right hand here.' She patted his shoulder affectionately then dispatched Steven to bed with a calm efficiency.

David made a point of kissing his son goodnight before leaving for the barn to do the evening milking. Shaggy settled himself on the carpet beside the bed and lay looking up at them with his great hairy head resting on his paws.

'Goodnight, dear,' Martha said softly before turning out the light. 'I'll leave the door open in case you need anything.'

Kristen waved in his direction. 'Goodnight, Steve. See you in the morning.' She followed her aunt down the hall and a sudden little giggle floated out to her.

Martha smiled. 'He's a shy little thing, much like you when you were his age. I expect you've got over it by now, though.'

She didn't see the wave of colour run up Kristen's neck. That painful shyness was something she was still fighting.

When Martha pushed open the door at the end of the hall, Kristen stepped across the floor with a sense of awed wonder, reaching out to touch the steep sloping wall before going over to the low window-seat. It wasn't as wide as she remembered, but then she had been so small when she spent all those hours sitting here under the eaves, gazing out to the abandoned manor house at the bottom of the hill. Now she could see it looming in the dimness with a dark majesty.

Her eyes swept back to the small room papered in a delicate pattern of pastel rosebuds on a pale pink background. A single bed was covered with a thick white rose-spattered quilt and an antique white chest of drawers stood against one wall, opposite a free-standing wardrobe also done in antique white.

'Thank you, Aunt Martha. You haven't changed a thing in here.' A smile danced in her eyes. 'This always was the most beautiful room in the house.'

'I think deep down I knew you'd come home to stay one day. This part of the country has that effect on some people. You might say we've been waiting for you.' She hugged her tightly. 'Now just make yourself comfortable. We have about half an hour before dinner. I suggest you get out of those damp clothes and change into some old thing. Jeans are fine. We never, dress for dinner. Come down whenever you're ready.' She set her case inside the door. 'There. David must have brought it up before he went to the barn.' She disappeared down the stairs humming to herself.

Thomas Wolfe was wrong, Kristen thought with a smile as she pulled off the damp crimson trouser-suit she had worn for

travelling. He had said you couldn't go home again. But she was home—and everything was the same as it was when she was little, even the manor at the bottom of the hill. She was sure in daylight it would look just the way she had always seen it in her imagination.

Dinner that evening was an occasion in spite of their casual dress. They ate in the dining room and the cosy fire gave an added distinction to the delicious meal. Martha chose to imitate the Pennsylvania Dutch and provide the traditional 'seven sweet and seven sour' to accompany the main course. As a result, the table groaned under the weight of everything from the sweet of fox-grape jelly, apple butter and ginger pears to the sour of green tomato relish, pickled beets and pepper cabbage as a compliment to her savoury bubbling hot potpie.

Kristen sampled a little of everything so as not to hurt her aunt's feelings, and by the time the plates were cleared away, she was really full. David sat back contentedly, savouring his dessert of shoo-fly pie served with steaming hot coffee. He made an effort to be polite and was an excellent conversationalist but, every time he spoke, his lilting accent shattered through her, reminding her of Jason.

For a long time after everyone was asleep that night, Kristen sat at her window and wondered if David thought she was part of some matchmaking scheme. A short little laugh escaped her. After knowing a man like Jason, how could anyone else measure up? He doesn't have to worry about me, she thought sadly.

Her eyes wandered to the now barely discernible house of her dreams and she fought against the familiar desolation that always came at the end of the day. Where was Jason now? Did he ever think of her? She pressed her hands savagely on the window sill. Why was it her every thought, every memory, sooner or later came

back to Jason Caine? But strangely, after a moment, a curious kind of peace washed over her and as her eyes picked out a small winking light in one of the ground floor windows of the manor, she was somehow comforted.

The sun was faintly pink on the distant hills when she quietly made her way downstairs the next morning, intending to start breakfast and have everything ready for Aunt Martha. She looped her long blonde hair behind her ears and slid her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, a tiny smile curving her mouth when she saw David coming in the back door, his arms filled with kindling.

He didn't say anything, giving her a cool impersonal nod before turning to set the wood on the floor near the stove.

'Good morning,' she said with forced brightness. 'Lovely morning, isn't it?'

He faced her squarely, studying her sea-green eyes with the pale shadows underneath them and the bones in her face that were almost gauntly visible. Her hair tumbled about her face in dull gold waves and its fairness only drew attention to the pallor of her clear skin. She felt the tide of rising colour creep up her neck and thrust her hands deeper into her pockets, trying to control the swift surge of shy embarrassment that came welling up. Her only defence was to attack. 'Do you like what you see David?' she asked shakily.

'I'm sure you don't need me to point out your short-comings, do you?'

Her jaw dropped but before she could recover, Martha bustled in.

'Oh, good morning, dears. I'm afraid I overslept. Thank you for lighting the stove.' She opened a cupboard door and took out a

large frying-pan then tied a snowy-white apron across her ample stomach.

'Let me help you,' Kristen said hurriedly. 'I intended to cook breakfast for you but David and I were—getting to know one another.'

He settled into the nearest chair and leaned back, watching her every move as she started setting out the plates and cutlery. 'You know how to cook, Miss Thorne?'

'Believe it or not, I'm very good.'

'Oh?' He linked his hands behind his head and stretched his long legs out in front of him. 'But of course. Martha told me you've travelled a great deal. Been to many of the great capitals of Europe, haven't you? You must be quite the gourmet.'

Kristen could have told him it was the hospitals, not the cities, she visited. And just as all the cities were the same seen through hospital windows, hospital food tasted the same all over the world too. But she resisted the impulse. It would sound too much like an appeal for sympathy and that was one thing she had never asked from anybody from the time she was six years old and nearly lost her leg.

'Not quite a gourmet,' she said sweetly. 'You'll find I'm a lot like Aunt Martha. Wholesome plain dishes are more in my line.'

'That's right, dear,' she spoke up, turning from the sizzling frying-pan. 'As long as it's warm and sticks to your ribs, a body couldn't ask for more.'

He tilted his head, wryly acknowledging the truth of it, and tackled his plate of bacon and eggs without another word.

Martha quickly finished her breakfast and apologised for having to leave in such a hurry, but she said his lordship would be up and wanting his breakfast too. After her day off yesterday, he probably would be as grouchy as a bear.

David was finishing his coffee after she had gone when a sudden commotion came from the stairway.

'Daddy! Daddy! She's gone!' Shrill tones and furious barks split the air. 'I looked in her room and she's gone!' Steven stopped dead in the doorway when he spotted Kristen doing dishes at the sink. Shaggy was hurtling so fast behind him he couldn't stop in time. He crashed into his back and got tangled up in his little legs and both of them went sprawling on the floor at her feet.

'As you can see, she's still here and likely to be so for a good long time,' David said irritably.

She flashed him a look then stooped down to help Steven up. 'Where did you think I'd go?'

He turned bright red. 'I was afraid you had gone back to California. My dad said you wouldn't be staying long.'

'Well your dad's wrong,' she said quietly, struggling to control a flare of temper. 'Aunt Martha invited me to stay as long as I liked. She's even hinted she'd like me to make it permanent.'

'Really?' Steven looked at her with shining eyes but his father said nothing.

'Yes, really. Now go and get dressed while I fix your breakfast.' She forced a smile and ruffled his sandy hair. 'I'll bet I have it ready before you are.'

'No you won't!' he squealed.

She watched him race away before turning back to the sink where David was standing, his face cold.

'I don't know how you have the nerve to come here,' he said harshly.

Her jaw dropped and her eyes widened in stupefaction, then all at once something snapped inside her, releasing her control. 'That does it!' She slammed her hands on the countertop, letting out a harsh breath. 'Let's straighten this out once and for all, shall we?'

As soon as she said it, she was horrified. It had come out so unexpectedly and didn't sound at all like her, but maybe it was for the best. With her hands gripped tightly in front of her, she faced him squarely and had to finish what she started. 'I've got the feeling you don't approve of me,' she said in a more subdued voice, 'but I don't know why. If you've got something to say, I'd appreciate it if you'd come right out and say it.'

His eyes narrowed and his mouth thinned to an angry line. 'All right. Go back to California. You're not wanted here.'

Her mouth started to tremble but she managed to control it. 'Why? Aunt Martha asked me to come—to help her care for Steven.'

'That was just an excuse you used and you know it. The only reason you're here is because of Jason Caine!'

All her breath seemed to leave her and all the colour drained from her face. She squeezed her eyes so tightly shut little white flashes jiggled across her sight. How could he know? 'Who told you about him?' she choked, her mind whirling. Her father promised her

nothing had been said. No one outside her immediate family knew how stupid she had been.

David turned away from her with a low sound of disgust, looking out the window over the sink with a scowl on his face. 'Did you think I wouldn't know? I know all about him—better even than he knows himself.' His voice became curiously raw. 'We grew up together in Penzance. My father worked for his father but that didn't stop us from being friends. We were closer than brothers, once . . .'

He moved restlessly and she watched as he settled his wide-brimmed western hat on his head. 'I'd ask you to leave,' he said gruffly, 'but I suppose that would only make you more determined to stay. Shall we simply agree to stay out of each other's way?' When she didn't say anything, just kept looking at him in a dazed, incredulous way, his lip curled and he turned on his heel and left.

It was several minutes before she could gather her scattered wits. Of all the terrible things to have happened, this had to be one of the worst. She had travelled nearly three thousand miles across the country to get away from all her memories of Jason only to end up living in the same house with his best friend!

Oh, Jason, Jason, she thought. Where are you now? A silent cry of anguish came welling up inside her. She could never have him and there could never be anyone else.

CHAPTER THREE

As autumn imperceptibly turned into winter, Kristen settled into a contented routine in spite of David Tremain. She was glad she had taken her father's advice to give up her job and come here. The placid pace of country living began to work its healing magic and almost without realising it, she felt herself gaining a new, overall perspective.

Jason was still very much a part of her but now, thinking of him merely brought a dull ache instead of that awful wrenching pain. Steven was a joy to care for and she often felt more satisfaction from being with him than from her routine job at the rehabilitation clinic. Shy and sensitive, Steven soaked up all the love she had to give. She rarely saw David, the harvest time keeping him away from the house for much of the day. When they did happen to meet, mainly at mealtimes, he was polite but remote and she managed to be the same.

If she brought Jason to his mind when he looked at her, he never mentioned it. And when she saw him, she concentrated on their differences and after a while was able to dismiss him altogether. He could never measure up to Jason.

Martha watched them wistfully at first, then with a shrugging acceptance. If she hoped something would develop between them, she hid her disappointment that it hadn't.

One afternoon in the middle of December, Kristen finished a letter to her parents then stood for a long time staring out of the front window. She was unusually restless and didn't know why. Down the sloping valleys, over the frost-coated fields, her eyes trained on the distant misty horizon. It wasn't the farmland that held her attention. Her sight had turned inside itself to. an entirely different

landscape with steep rocky cliffs relentlessly assaulted by the powerful surge of the Atlantic. And standing there, so tall and still, his wind-whipped clothing moulded to his powerful frame, his face lifted to the boiling sky, his thick black hair carved against his head, was Jason Caine.

A dull twisting ache ran through her before she took a deep breath and pulled herself together, turning back to the serenely peaceful living room where Steven sat on the floor before the fire, petting Shaggy. She smiled almost desperately. 'How about going for a walk, Steve? We'll blow the cobwebs out of our minds.'

'Cobwebs?'

'From sitting too long in one place.'

'Oh, I get it.' His bright blue eyes danced with mischief as he ran to the closet and began bundling himself into his boots. 'Where shall we go to get rid of them?'

'To the manor and back? I've been wanting to take a closer look but haven't had the chance until now.' She felt an almost magnetic pull to the place that became stronger every day.

The smile left Steven's face. 'You know we can't go there. Aunt Martha says his lordship doesn't like people coming too close to his house. He has a chair with wheels and if he sees us, he'll--he'll—'

'He'll what?' Her forehead wrinkled in a frown. 'If the man can't walk then he can't very well do much to us if he catches us, can he?' She laughed conspiratorially. 'Besides, he won't even see us. If he did, it wouldn't matter. You've heard Aunt Martha talk about him. She says he's really a nice man. She thinks he's just lonely

and won't admit it. Come on,' she cajoled, buttoning his coat against the cold. 'I've been wanting to do this for a long time.'

The house looked so different from when she was young. No longer bleak and abandoned, it had an immense dignity standing there, waiting for her. The closer she got to it, the more she felt a curious kind of peace, almost a sense of belonging.

It was attractively nestled in a fold of undulating countryside with a stream looking like a thin ribbon of crystal running along one side before disappearing in the lacework of cultivated fields and tufts of wood copses in a distant shallow valley. She marvelled that the man who restored it had the foresight to make it part of the scenery rather than an unwanted intrusion into it.

Suddenly conscious of an uneasy trembling in her arm, she looked down in surprise at Steven standing close to her side, gripping her hand with fearful shudders. 'What's the matter?'

'Let's get out of here,' he said, tugging her hand.

'Are you afraid?' She was shocked when she saw his eyes round with fear.

'I heard Daddy and Aunt Martha talking about his lordship. He's terrible!'

'Steven. He's a man just like any other. You don't think Aunt Martha would keep house for him if he was so bad, do you?'

'She said he fell off a horse and nearly died and it changed him. Now he's a terrible ogre. He's going to get us!'

'Oh, I can't believe she called him an ogre. You've been watching too much television and you're making this up.' But she allowed

him to rush up the hill ahead of her and when she reached the top he was huddled together with Shaggy, waiting for her.

'He really is an ogre,' he insisted.

'I don't believe it. Have you ever seen him? Talked with him?'

'No.' He dipped his chin to his chest.

'There you are, then. Just because he can't walk doesn't make him any less of a man. If you ask your dad, he'll tell you as much, I'm sure. Didn't he used to work for him?'

Steven didn't answer but kept urging her to take him home.

They hadn't gone far when the sound of horses made them stop and turn to look across the empty fields. Two riders were approaching and Steven recognised them before Kristen was able to push her wind-whipped hair out of her eyes. One figure was unmistakably David Tremain straddling his huge black hunter, but the other more diminutive figure was hidden by his bulk until they came abreast of them.

'Oh look! It's Daddy and Auntie Em!'

Kristen stood rooted to the spot. Her mouth was dry and she couldn't swallow. It couldn't be! She rubbed a hand across her eyes and stared as they dismounted.

David stood quite still in heavy denims and thick boots, his sheepskin jacket buttoned up against the cold. Next to him, in a slim royal blue velvet riding-habit and matching hat with an exotic feather tucked in the band, stood Emma Caine.

If she had been the fainting type, Kristen would have swooned right then. But she wasn't. She stood there, shock waves trembling up and down her spine, not believing her eyes. Was this girl going to haunt her the rest of her life? What was she doing here? *Here*, not in Cornwall. How was she going to walk away a second time without making an utter fool of herself? Her legs quivered and her breathing became ragged but for the life of her, she couldn't move.

'Kristen,' David stepped forward, 'I'd like you to meet a new neighbour of ours, Emma Caine. Emma, this is Kristen Thorne.'

A new neighbour! The words banged in her head. This had to be some hideous figment of her imagination. She didn't move, didn't speak. Emma nodded in her direction and she thought she detected a flash of pity in her dark eyes but she must have imagined it. Pity? From Jason's wife?

Steven bridged the awkward moment by noisily demanding attention. Shaggy barked excitedly and Emma was the first to turn away and quiet the dog and talk to Steven.

'Emma's been a close friend for years,' David explained, looking at Kristen oddly. 'She heard your name mentioned yesterday and came especially to meet you.'

She tore her eyes away from Emma then abruptly turned on her heel and quickly walked away. What did they think she'd do? Stand there and pass the time of day? Ask very nonchalantly how Jason was? It was too much to ask. Scalding tears began to blind her and several times she stumbled as she made her way home. Her nose was running ignominiously by the time she reached her tiny bedroom and flung herself miserably across her bed.

Why couldn't it end? She still loved Jason as much as she ever had. And married to that beautiful girl, he was still as far out of reach as he ever was . . .

She must have slept eventually because it was quite dark when she sat up in her bed, trying to get her bearings before the crushing weight of depression settled over her once more. Her eyes felt swollen and dry as if sand was in them. Giving a slight groan, she pushed a hand through her tangled hair.

Jason. Jason. He and his wife are new neighbours. It ran through her head like a refrain.

Shrugging out of her wrinkled clothes, she slipped on a nightgown and thick robe and started down to the kitchen. She wasn't hungry but some warm milk might bring sleep again, and forgetfulness, she hoped.

The house was completely still and the kitchen chilly but not uncomfortable. She switched on a small lamp before throwing some kindling into the stove and starting the fire.

When the milk was heated and poured into a thick mug, she nearly dropped it on the way to the table. David stood in the doorway leaning negligently against the side, staring at her, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his jeans, the cold expression in his eyes making her shiver.

'Oh,' she said awkwardly. 'I thought everyone was asleep.'

His expression was unreadable but when he spoke his voice was cold. 'Sit down.'

She sank down stiffly in a chair, facing him across the small width of the table, not daring to take her eyes off him.

He smiled grimly, going to the cupboard and taking out a bottle of whisky and a small glass. He poured himself a measure and tossed it down the back of his throat without a word then turned, pinning her with his intent eyes.

She blinked and swallowed and stood up meaning to run, but before she could move, he came around the table and stood towering in front of her. For a moment she toyed with the idea of calling out for Aunt Martha but he said quite softly: 'I wouldn't if I were you. You'll only wake Steven unnecessarily. Your aunt isn't here. She sent a message that she was staying down at the manor tonight. A new house guest and all that.'

She sank back on to her chair and slowly let out her breath. Now what? She was suddenly nervous of him.

'You were extremely rude to Emma this afternoon.'

Oh yes. Emma. She gripped her mug between her hands trying to absorb some warmth from it.

'Well? Haven't you anything to say for yourself?'

'I don't need you to point out my bad manners, David. I'm sure Emma understood only too well.'

'God!' His fist came down on the table with a crash that made the glasses jump. 'Have you no conscience? You used your deceitful charm to tear a man to shreds, yet you have the audacity to sit here calmly as if you haven't a care in the world.'

Kristen's eyes left his grim face and stopped at the bottle on the table between them, then she shook her head helplessly. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Don't you? I thought I was making myself perfectly clear. Just the way you did when you walked out on Jason.' He sat easily in his chair but his eyes were seething, goading a response from her.

'What did you expect me to do? What would you have done in my place?'

'If you loved him the way he thought you did, you wouldn't have walked out on him. You'd have stayed. But no, the minute you found you'd have to put yourself out, you walked away and left him alone to pick up the pieces of his life.'

She got to her feet trembling with outrage. 'You have no right to say these things to me. You know absolutely nothing about it, about what I feel for Jason.'

'Oh, don't I?'

Her white lips quivered but she held her head high. 'You can't begin to know how much he hurt me.'

'If you really loved him, you wouldn't have let a little hurt stop you. If you really cared, you would have stayed with him and helped him.'

'A *little hurt*? *Stayed* with him?' she demanded raggedly.

'You walked out on him when he needed you. You promised to marry him.' He pushed himself away from the table and stood with his feet wide apart, his hands bunched into fists at his sides, his eyes blazing. 'He was my friend. Do you think it doesn't tear at my guts to see what you've done to him?'

'And what was I supposed to do about Emma? Just ignore her as if she wasn't there? Pretend she didn't exist the way he did when he asked me to marry him?'

'You didn't have to worry about her. She never would have been in the way. She's a very understanding girl and she loves Jason, which is more than I can say for you. She, at least, really cares about his happiness.'

Kristen stared at him. 'Are you crazy? Have you gone completely mad? No wife would be that understanding. No wife would calmly step aside and let her husband go to another woman. Not if she really loved him. She'd fight to keep him. At least that's what I'd do. But I had to give him up without a word because I had no right to his love in the first place. He belongs to Emma!' She put a dazed hand to her shaking lips and stared at him. How could she expose her innermost feelings like this? But somehow it all kept coming out and she couldn't stop. 'You don't know Jason as well as you thought you did and I didn't know him at all,' she said in a choked voice. 'Exactly what did he tell you? Or was it Emma? You don't really believe his wife wouldn't put an end to everything between us, do you?'

He looked at her as if he didn't believe what she was saying. A flicker of uncertainty crossed his features before he turned and concentrated on the blackness beyond the kitchen window. Then he looked back at her and sudden complete comprehension dawned on him. His shoulders sagged as he raked an unsteady hand through his hair. 'Oh my God,' he whispered hoarsely, staring at her, utter dismay replacing his usual cold harsh expression. 'He didn't tell you—he doesn't belong to Emma—not in that way.'

'What other way is there?' she said haltingly, her heart suddenly banging against her ribs.

'That damnable pride of his! I never thought he'd go to such lengths.' His eyes burned hers. 'She's not his wife. She's his cousin!'

Dumbfounded, she gaped at him. All the colour drained from her face and the room began to sway. 'Why? Why did he tell me she was his wife?'

'Pride,' he muttered. 'That's all it could be. He didn't want you to know.'

She blinked, a sudden cold dread sweeping over her. 'Didn't want me to know—what?'

He took a deep breath and held it before expelling it slowly. 'You really don't know, do you? You haven't any idea.'

'Tell me!'

He poured a glass of whisky and set it in front of her.

'Is it that bad?' Her eyes rounded and nearly popped out of her head. 'Please! Just tell me.'

He faced her grimly, breathing deeply. 'All right, Kristen, Jason Caine is the man your aunt calls "his lordship".'

It hit her like a blow. His lordship. The man from England. The recluse in a wheelchair.

She looked at David. 'I thought he lived in Cornwall—tell me—how ... when ...? Oh God. I thought—and all this time he's been right here. How did he...? Oh David!' She clenched her hands to her face, stunned.

'Emma can tell you all about it. She was there. She wants to come in the morning and explain. Will you see her?'

'I want to see Jason! All this time—he's been right here! All this time—I've been looking at his house. *His!*'

'You can't see him. My God, do you think he'd let you come? After the lengths he went to so you wouldn't find out?'

Her whole body sagged. 'I didn't know. No wonder you were so angry when I came here.'

A dull red ran up his neck. 'I apologise for that.'

'It doesn't matter now. What matters is Jason. What can I do?'

'Wait for Emma. Let her tell you how it all happened, then we'll think of something between us.'

As she went through the motions of taking a shower, cleaning her teeth, getting dressed, she tried to keep a grip on reality, but all her actions were numbed. Her seat at the window was cramped and uncomfortable but she wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, staring out to the house at the bottom of the hill. Jason's house. Her fingers clenched savagely. Oh Jason—how could you?

When Emma finally came, Kristen found her seated at the kitchen table looking deeply into David's eyes, oblivious to everything else around her. Steven wasn't quite so observant and raced up to Emma and began chattering away at her.

'Not now, son.' David got to his feet and shrugged into his coat. 'Auntie Em and Kristen have to talk. You'll see her later.' He threw Emma a reassuring look and the corners of his mouth lifted ever so

slightly when he realised Kristen had registered what she had seen. Then he tactfully took Steven outside with him.

Kristen smoothed her hands down the sides of her jeans and awkwardly sat down in the chair David had vacated, looking at Emma and not knowing what to say.

Dejectedly, Emma sat there, dressed in a tailored suit of fine tan wool with a dark brown turtle-neck sweater and several expensive gold chains about her neck. 'Forgive me for coming over this early, Miss Thorne, but I had to see you.' Her voice was slightly breathless, her dark eyes expectant and trusting.

Try as she might, Kristen couldn't dislike the girl. She sighed and tried to smile.

'You have every right to refuse to speak to me,' Emma went on. 'I never should have gone along with Jason's horrible deception. At the time I didn't realise you didn't know anything about his accident.' She bent her head and stared at her hands. 'David told me he talked to you last night and explained some of it. All I can say is, I'm sorry.'

Kristen swallowed jerkily. 'How is Jason? Is he—well?'

'He's fine, really, although his back gives him trouble whenever there's a change in the weather.'

'Is he happy?'

'No! And it's all my fault.' Sudden shimmering tears stood in her eyes before they began to spill down her cheeks and, even though she tried to brush them away, more came to take their place. She pressed a lacy handkerchief to her nose. 'If only I hadn't tried to ride Satan—'

'You'll have to start at the beginning,' Kristen cut in softly. 'David didn't really tell me much.' She sat stiffly in her chair, willing herself to listen objectively to what Emma might say.

She sobbed into her handkerchief. 'I was living in Penzance with Uncle Matthew, Jason's father, when he died. Jason came back for the funeral and—and he was hateful to me. He didn't like my boyfriend. He said *he* was my guardian now and he wasn't as lenient as his father. I was going to have to come here and live in his new house with him and his bride and abide by his rules. I didn't want to live in another country. Cornwall was everything I wanted but he wouldn't hear of it. He was moving to the Manor permanently and I had to come whether I liked it or not. Oh, he can be so overbearing!' Her face twisted bitterly before fresh tears spilled over her fingers. 'I was angry and I ran out of the house and—and Satan was tethered there. Jason had been riding him earlier, you see, and he's the only one who could control him. I didn't think—I just jumped on his back and rode towards the cliffs. It was raining and slippery and I couldn't see where I was going.'

Kristen put a shaking hand to her mouth, picturing it.

Emma's face was blotchy and her nose began to run. All of a sudden she looked so young and helpless and Kristen could see her poise and sophistication were slipping badly. The girl hiccupped and bit back a sob. 'Oh, it was terrible, Miss Thorne. Jason tried to catch me. He ran and ran but I didn't listen when he shouted to jump. Somehow the reins got tangled in Satan's hooves and we fell. I was thrown clear but Jason was crushed in the mud under the horse.'

Kristen made a strangled sound deep in her throat and bent her head, the picture of it stark in her mind.

'Oh, he moaned and moaned! The horse had broken his front legs and couldn't get up and Jason was trapped underneath and I couldn't do anything. By the time I got help, he was unconscious. He woke up in hospital and the doctors told him his spine was damaged. They had to try a dangerous operation but it didn't work. After that, they told him to be prepared to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair.'

The only sound in the kitchen was the harsh sobbing coming from Emma's throat. Kristen could only sit in numbed silence picturing the man she loved covered with mud, lying helpless on a rainy Cornish coast, then lying all alone in a hospital. Finally she found her voice and asked very quietly: 'Is that when he stopped writing to me?'

Emma nodded. 'He said he couldn't marry you now. He couldn't have you see him like that. His pride could never stand your pity.'

'But he came back to California.'

Emma dabbed at her red-rimmed eyes. 'He didn't intend to see you. There was a doctor there who specialised in spinal diseases. Jason said it was his last chance.'

'And?'

She shook her head. 'The doctor said the injury was too recent and the operation too new. He would examine him again later but he didn't want him to get his hopes up. It didn't look too encouraging. He has this pain in his legs every once in a while but it doesn't mean anything.' She blinked back fresh tears. 'It's so—hopeless.'

Kristen expelled her breath and ran a hand across her eyes. 'So he introduced you as his wife knowing I wouldn't try to see him again. It had to put an end to everything.'

Emma nodded. 'I didn't know he was going to do it.' Her eyes pleaded for understanding: 'When I saw you I thought he had told you everything and it was going to be all right again. I could see just by looking at you that you truly loved him. But then he called me his wife and I couldn't say a word. After you left, he told me if I never told you the truth, I could forget about shouldering the blame for the accident. But it is my fault and I can't forget it. I stayed in California as long as I dared but I had to come back. I know my place is here with him even though he told me he didn't care what I did or where I went any more. I've caused him so much unhappiness.'

Kristen stood up and walked to the kitchen window. The clouds were low and grey. There would be no sunshine today and she thought how apt it was. The weather matched her spirits. She tried to crush a rising sense of nervousness and turned to face Emma. 'Why did you decide to tell me this now? I've been here nearly two months. Why now?'

'Oh, don't you see? I was in California until a couple of days ago. I didn't know it was you. Martha just mentions you as her niece. She doesn't call you by name. Yesterday was the first time. She said she hoped she could make a nice Christmas for you because you seemed to be a little homesick at Thanksgiving. She thought you missed Los Angeles. I nearly fainted. Your name isn't all that common, you know. And to be from California was too much of a coincidence.'

'Did you say anything to her? Does Jason know?'

Emma bit her lip and stood on unsteady legs. 'No, I'm sure he doesn't. I didn't say anything to either of them. I came to see David right away— Jason would have a fit if he knew—but I thought he

would know if you were the same Kristen. And then I saw you yesterday.'

Kristen felt the colour rush to her face. 'I apologise for the way I acted. I still thought you were Jason's wife and I had no idea he lived here.'

'I understand, really. David said you didn't know Jason lives down the hill because Martha never calls him by name either. It's always "his lordship" with her.' A sad smile twisted her mouth. 'Yet that's one of the reasons he left Penzance. He felt his title put too many restrictions on him. He wanted to be simply an ordinary man.' She put a tentative hand on her arm. 'Miss Thorne? Is it possible for us to be friends? Will you help me to help Jason? He needs you!'

She covered Emma's hand with her clammy one. 'All my friends call me Kris.' Her voice cracked and they both started to laugh and cry at the same time.

CHAPTER FOUR

SOME of the shock had worn off when David came back but Kristen was still slightly dazed.

'I've told her all about it and everything's going to be all right now,' Emma told him with a watery grin, watching him shrug out of his coat.

'Oh? You've thought of something?' He frowned and sat at the small table, keeping one eye on Steven still outside with Shaggy.

'He won't see me, Emma,' Kristen said quietly, rubbing her hands in a nervous gesture. 'No matter what the pretext, I'm sure he won't let me into his house.'

'Oh, I hadn't thought of that,' she wailed. 'Jason's always telling me I'm too much of a romantic. I guess he's right. I thought if you could just see him again and explain that it doesn't matter he's in a wheelchair—'. she broke off and her eyes widened. 'It doesn't make any difference, does it?'

'Of course not,' she whispered. 'I've never stopped loving him.'

'Well, then,' her mouth twisted in a satisfied smile. 'Love can work wonders. When she sees him everything will be all right again.'

'But how is she going to see him? That's the problem of the moment,' David said roughly, trying not to show his exasperation. Emma had a one-track mind and couldn't see very far ahead.

She tossed her head and stamped her foot with impatience. 'Can't you think of something, David? All he does is sit alone in front of the fire and brood. He hasn't even the comfort of his dog any more

because he banished him to a pen outside the house. He's lost interest in everything. Even Martha can't reach him and I understand she, at least, made him laugh now and then. I think he may be getting desperate.'

Kristen wrung her hands. 'We've got to help him.'

'What can we do? Can you think of anything, David?' Emma went to the stove and poured him a cup of steaming coffee. 'Here. You always think better when your stomach's full. Remember that Christmas with Sir Lawrence? You ate too much plum pudding but you said you had to eat so you could think and Jason said your anatomy must be different from ours. Our brains were in our heads but yours was in your stomach.'

David reddened and accepted the coffee with a self-conscious tilt of his head. 'I was a growing boy of seventeen then. Jason was twenty-two and had forgotten what it was like. He didn't need as much nourishment as I did.'

'Nobody needed as much nourishment as you did.'

'That's it!' David jumped to his feet.

Both Emma and Kristen nearly pounced on him. 'What?'

'You can wheedle Jason into throwing a Christmas party just the way you did old Sir Lawrence.'

'But Sir Lawrence was my Godfather. He always felt sorry for "poor little orphan Emma". I had him wrapped round my little finger.'

'And Jason is your guardian now. At least he will be until you turn twenty-five next month. You can badger him until you get your

own way.' His eyes gleamed a brilliant blue. 'You're very good at that sort of thing.'

She didn't take offence at the back-handed compliment. Her eyes were already taking on a calculating sparkle.

'But how will throwing a party help Jason?' Kristen said softly.

'It's a start, don't you see? He'll be surrounded by people instead of brooding alone. He'll have to see he's still the same man he always was in spite of the chair.'

'He won't buy that, David.' Kristen shook her head. 'There's no way he'll do it.'

'You don't know Emma. Besides, it's the only way you'll be able to see him so it's worth a try. He won't refuse his hospitality to you if he's surrounded by a lot of other people as well. His pride wouldn't allow it.'

'And we'll have a Christmas tree and presents and a fancy dress ball!' Emma clapped her hands together and her eyes shone.

'Let's not get carried away,' he admonished her as he would have done to Steven. 'The party's for Jason's benefit, not yours. And I don't want you breathing a word about Kristen being here or that'll put paid to our plans. We'll just have to hope Martha continues her policy of not mentioning any names.'

Emma's face fell but she managed to keep her spirits high. 'I'll go now and start badgering.' Her fur-lined trench coat was lying over the back of a chair and David helped her into it. 'I'll go into Philadelphia and buy a new dress. Green velvet would be nice, don't you think?' Without waiting for a reply, she blew him a kiss. 'Wish me luck.' Then she was gone.

He watched her through the window for several seconds, a curious vulnerable look on his face as she kissed Steven goodbye before disappearing down the hill. He turned back to Kristen. 'Would you believe she's twenty-four? The same age as my wife, Judith, would have been.' His face took on a faraway look but there was no sadness there. 'Emma's a very young twenty-four, I think. She may never grow up. Jason has his hands full.'

A shudder passed through her as she thought of Jason being crushed in the mud because of Emma's childish display of wilfulness. 'Do you really think your idea will work? Will it change anything for him?'

'It's got to.'

'But what if he refuses? It's been a long time since he's seen anybody, even you, hasn't it? And you're his best friend.'

'I was once, when we were very young, but a lot of water has run under the bridge since those days. Jason and Emma and Judith and I. . .' He sighed deeply but almost at once he started to smile.

'What are you thinking, David? I call almost see the wheels turning.'

His smile deepened. 'Jason's going to have to invite the whole countryside, if I know Emma. She could probably even talk the Amish into coming— and they don't believe in having parties! I can hardly wait.'

Later that evening Martha came home full of the news of the coming party to be held at the manor. 'I don't know how his lordship's cousin managed to talk him into it, being only two weeks before Christmas and all, but it's to be a real old-fashioned Christmas party. I never thought I'd see the day when he'd allow

people into his life again. It was like pulling teeth but he finally agreed. That cousin of his is a regular miracle-worker, she is.'

David looked at Kristen, his eyes glittering, but he didn't say a word. All of a sudden he seemed as young and as vulnerable as herself and Kristen wondered what it must have been like when he and Jason were growing up together. They must have led someone a merry chase.

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When Kristen saw Jason again she was shocked at his appearance. Even though the two weeks before Christmas passed with agonising slowness, giving her ample opportunity to rehearse what she would say, she found she was not prepared for the drastic change in him.

All the colourful sights and sounds and scents of the Christmas party, now in full swing, were muted here in his huge, dark, dimly lit library. Once in a while a burst of music filtered its way into the room but it was a dim and hollow echo of the gaiety centred in the sparkling drawing room.

She stood nervously, leaning back against the carved door for support, watching him as he sat near a black marble fireplace with his back angled so she could see only a part of his face. His hair was longer but still thick and black and shining on his sagging shoulders. His tall body was slumped forward in his wheelchair as if he was trying to draw warmth from the dying fire.

She took several unsteady steps closer and saw his thin fine-boned hands folded in his lap. There was an air of neglect about him that made her want to cry out at the injustice of it. The unhealthy pallor of his skin made the bones in his face even more sharply defined, giving him an older, more worn and haggard look. Even dressed as

he was in an immaculate wine-red dinner jacket, white frilled shirt and black trousers, he managed to look defeated. But it was the greyness about his mouth and the bleakness in his eyes that caused her the most pain. She was looking at a young man who had lost a lot of weight and who had aged terribly in the last few months. Worse than that, he was a man who had given up hope. She couldn't, she wouldn't let him do that.

Fighting to keep the tremors from her voice, she said quite softly: 'It's not much of a party without you, Jason.'

A startled silence followed and then she heard a deafening crackle as the shell of a burning log fell in the grate, competing with her heartbeat as to which was the loudest. Jason jerked his head back with an achingly familiar -instinctive air of pride and independence. He stiffened and sat with rigid, listening stillness without turning in her direction.

'Your guests must be wondering why their host hasn't put in an appearance yet.' She crossed the dim room on wobbly legs hidden beneath the long dark blue wool dress Aunt Martha had made for her and stopped in front of him.

His bony hands clenched in a violently convulsive movement on the arms of his chair as if he wished he could spring to his feet and put a thousand miles between them. His eyes slashed at her with angry denial. Then he ran a hand across his haggard grey face and slowly let out his breath, his shoulders slumping in defeat. 'So . . . now you know.'

'Yes. Now I know.' She turned and stretched her hands to the fire as if to warm them, but it was a defensive action to keep from flinging herself into his arms. 'How could you keep this from me?'

she said bitterly, whipping up an anger to take the place of all the love that came welling up, a love she knew he would only reject.

'It was for your own good. But I'm sure you wouldn't understand that.' His voice was curiously flat and dead.

'Understand?' She swung back to face him. 'No. I don't understand. How can you expect me to even try? Do you have any idea what you did to me?'

He didn't turn away from her accusing glare. He sat quite still and stared into the blazing greenness of her eyes and his voice remained dead. 'I don't want you here, Kris. You can see for yourself I'm not the man I was. Take a good look at me, then close the door on your way out.'

She caught her breath sharply and sudden bright tears swam in her eyes. 'Oh, don't, Jason. You were successful in sending me away once, but don't expect me to leave you again.'

His jaw clenched and he gripped the arms of his chair with such force she thought they would snap under the pressure. 'I don't want you here!'

'You don't mean that.'

'Get out of here, Kris.'

She was trembling. 'How can I? Will you show me how? You've managed to shut me out of your life but how am I supposed to walk away and forget you?'

'It shouldn't be too difficult now that you've seen me.' He turned his face away to stare into the fire guttering on the hearth.

'I don't believe it. You've given up!'

'I've been beaten. There's a difference.' For a moment a flash of anger crossed his face but it was quickly replaced by despair and Kristen had to force herself to ignore the sinking feeling in her stomach.

'I always thought you were a strong man, not a weak one.'

He spoke through gritted teeth in a voice that was deadly quiet. 'Get out of my life, Kris. Better ones than you have tried and failed. I don't need your reverse psychology.'

'What do you need?'

He looked into her blazing eyes for a screaming instant and a low mirthless laugh escaped him. 'Whatever it is, it isn't you! I don't know how you found me or why you have come—I don't really care. But I want you to leave. Now. Your journey was for nothing. Go back to California. At least before, I was content with .the knowledge that whatever else we shared, I never had to put up with your pity. I won't tolerate it now.'

'I don't hear any violins,' she said incredulously, tilting her head as if listening. 'There should be at least one playing a sad mournful wail to go with what you're saying. It's the most maudlin thing I've ever heard. Next you'll be telling me you're only half a man and you can't stand the thought of my seeing you confined to the prison of your wheelchair!'

'Get out of here!' He leaned forward, his face contorted, a flash of angry fire leaping into his dull grey eyes.

'And what if I choose to stay? Will you throw me out? Do you think you're still whole enough to do that?'

'James!' He shouted for his servant, his hoarse voice bouncing off the walls.

She smiled serenely but couldn't keep the mischief from dancing in her eyes. 'Don't waste your breath, my darling. James isn't coming. David's keeping him busy for a while so that I can talk to you without any interruptions. If James does happen to hear you bellowing, David will be sure he ignores it.'

She stood firmly planted in front of him with the fireplace at her back, her hands on her hips, her gleaming gold hair piled on top of her head with soft tendrils trailing on to her slender neck. The dress she wore had a scooped neckline and long tight sleeves that gave her the appearance of thin fragility, but there was the steel strength of determination running through her.

He clenched his hands in his lap before letting out a ragged bitter sigh and the harsh lines bracketing his mouth became bluish. 'David Tremain?' he said in a thick strangled voice.

She nodded slowly, suddenly sensing a change in the air, a different kind of anger.

He sat stiffly as if bracing himself. 'AH right, Kris. I'm your captive audience. What did you hope to gain by coming here?'

'Nothing less than marriage!'

Her deliberate bluntness stunned him. 'You've got to be kidding! I've changed, Kris. We can't go back. The age of miracles has passed. I'm a cripple.'

'The Jason Caine I knew never would have given up so easily.'

'I mean it when I say everything's over between us. It has to be.'

'I won't accept that. You asked me to marry you once and I won't let you end it because of this.' She tapped the arm of his chair.

'Good God, this isn't some romantic novel you're in where all you have to say is "I love you" and everybody lives happily ever after,' he sneered. 'This is real.' He made a choking sound and turned his haggard face away from her.

'Maybe I am a romantic. Maybe I do believe in happy endings. Nothing says it can't happen in real life.' She looked at him helplessly, dropping to her knees in front of him. 'I love you, Jason. I don't care if you can't walk. I tried not to love you when I thought you were married to Emma. I knew it was wrong to love a married man, but in spite of everything you did to kill it, it won't die. Surely that means something?'

'For how long?' he dragged his hands over his face and focused his bleak gaze on her own hands gripping his lifeless legs as if he hadn't felt them there. 'How long can you keep on loving an invalid? How long until you're bored with looking at me sitting here, day after day, year after year? You're young and alive. You need a whole man who can offer you more than a lifetime of caring for him.'

'Isn't that what love is? Caring?' Agony flashed deep in her eyes. 'And you don't have to just sit here. There are things you can do that don't require legs. Right now it looks hopeless but it isn't unless you actually give up hope. And I won't let you do it!'

'Is that how you see yourself?' His jaw hardened as he brought his face close to hers. 'Do you think of yourself as my light at the end of the tunnel? I don't need you to give me hope.'

She caught her breath sharply, fighting to control the pain that seared through her at his cruelty. 'Maybe you don't need me, Jason.'

I can accept that. But,' she swallowed hard and stared at him with quivering dread, 'do you love me?'

He sat motionless, not even breathing, staring at her for endless agonising seconds with eyes an unreadable opaque grey. His mouth thinned before his shaking hands suddenly reached for her shoulders, closing over them, bringing her closer. Then his mouth was crushing hers in a searing blaze of helpless pent up longing that matched her own and gave her all the answer she needed.

The arm of his chair dug into her side but she didn't even feel it. It was ecstasy to be this close to him again, to feel the warmth and strength and firmness of his mouth covering hers, to have his breath filling her, breathing life back into her battered heart. His arms slid down her back with bruising demand, pulling her closer still while his lips mindlessly roamed over her face and neck with urgent, burning, seeking kisses.

She responded with an ardour that matched his. Her fingers bunched convulsively in his long thick hair as she tried to mould herself against his chest but, sitting as he was, his knees were in the way.

Then, as if he realised the awkwardness of her posture, too, a deep shudder ran through him and he uttered a groan of self-loathing and pushed her away, leaving her completely bereft.

'How can either of us be content with half an embrace?' he muttered deep in his throat, his face twisting with disgust. 'Remember how it used to be? How you used to fit so well in my arms, melting against my body as if you were made for it? And now—this!' He slammed both his fists on the arms of his chair with utter loathing.

'It doesn't matter. All that matters is that we love each other.'

'Love doesn't mean anything. More sins have been committed in the name of love than anything else.' His voice shook with contempt as he choked the words out. 'It's all changed now, Kris. What we might have had can never be the same. You're a fool to think we can go back.'

She squeezed her eyes shut at the hopelessness shattering through her. 'You can't mean it.'

'Oh, but I do. Get out of my life.'

Somehow she got to her feet and stood in front of him cold and still and lifeless. Pain was stark in her eyes and her throat felt tight with tears. 'I don't want to leave you, Jason. I only want to stay with you, to be near you, to love you.'

'Not like this. It's better to let everything between us die. It never really began anyway.'

'I tried to get over you before. I can't do it!'

'You'll manage. I have.' His voice was curt as he clumsily manoeuvred his chair towards the door, his face taut and unyielding. 'If you think about it, you'll see it's better this way. One day you'll even thank me for it.'

'Such altruism,' she said, angry at his cold refusal to listen to reason. 'It's made you a weak man.'

He tipped his head back with a little of his old arrogance but he didn't look at her. 'I'm a proud man, not a weak one.'

'Your pride is your weakness!'

If he heard her, he gave no sign of it. His movements were awkward and clumsy but he managed to open the door and sit coldly, waiting for her to leave.

'Isn't there anything I can say?'

'Go home, Kris,' he said tiredly. 'Find someone else and forget me.'

'David said you might be like this,' she choked, 'but I hoped he'd be wrong. I thought my love would be enough.'

At the mention of David's name there was again a sudden indefinable tension flickering between them and it confused her, but before she could say anything, David came into the hallway with the stocky, grey-haired James, Jason's gardener who was now his valet. The small smile hovering about David's lips was abruptly wiped away when he saw Kristen's colourless face and unnaturally bright eyes.

'Merry Christmas, Jase,' he said quietly, standing tall and very much at ease in a well-tailored black broadcloth suit. Prismatic light from a crystal chandelier danced in his sandy-streaked hair as he reached out his hand.

Jason's face turned colder, if that was possible, and, ignoring his hand, he sat glaring at him without speaking for a long quivering moment.

A muscle jerked in David's jaw as he slowly lowered his hand, somehow managing to make a show of indifference to the rudeness. 'That's strange. Emma told me the accident affected your spine, not your arms.'

'Stay away from Emma,' he said through clenched teeth.

David spoke softly, his sudden tensing almost imperceptible. 'As long as you're in that chair, you can't make any order to stay away from her stick. I'll do as I please.'

His flaring murderous eyes pinned David. 'Wasn't Judith enough for you?'

'Don't!'

It was only one simple word yet it sounded like an ominous threat. David's eyes narrowed and his voice was dangerously quiet, very much at odds with his belligerent challenging stance. He was unnaturally still, his fists bunched at his sides, his feet planted wide apart as if bracing himself. If he suddenly decided to leap forward and pounce on Jason, Kristen wouldn't have been at all surprised.

Jason was sitting stiffly forward, the taut cords in his neck standing out, a look of murderous hatred twisting his white lips, his hands clenched savagely on the arms of his chair.

The air between them was thick and seething and she helplessly looked at James who -hovered unobtrusively in the background like the perfect servant.

With magnificent aplomb, considering his relatively new status as valet, James took a large porcelain vase from an antique table against the wall and shattered it on the floor at the side of Jason's chair.

'How clumsy of me, sir,' he said without expression. 'Let me move you away from the debris and I'll clear it up at once.'

Jason's breath hissed in his throat when he let it out. 'Never mind, James. Show Mr Tremain the door. He's leaving.'

David blinked and stepped back in a dazed fashion, dragging his hand across his strained face. After a moment he found his voice. 'What about you, Kris? I take it the great Earl wouldn't overlook the fact that you're not on his social level either?'

She caught her breath sharply. Such a thing had never occurred to her. Jason hadn't flaunted his wealth and until now she hadn't known he was an Earl. He'd never acted differently from any ordinary person. Or had she just been so in love with him she hadn't noticed?

'That's right, both of you,' he sneered. 'Take a look around and tell me if either of you belong in such surroundings.'

The oval reception hall where they were standing was magnificent. Rich black marble gleamed beneath their feet in stark contrast to the pale ivory painted walls. Tall graceful columns supported a lofty frescoed ceiling and suspended from the centre of it was a monstrous crystal chandelier that must have cost a fortune if only for its delicacy. Two costly antique tables stood opposite each other in the vast hall, their polished surfaces reflected in two bronze bowls filled with freshly cut sprigs of holly.

She pictured herself in her usual attire of faded jeans and sweaters and David in his stained work clothes and heavy boots and her heart sank. Jason was right. Neither of them belonged here.

Of all the arguments he had used to make her see the hopelessness of any love between them, this had been the most effective. Once he had told her they came from two different worlds. Now she knew what he meant. There was no way she could ever belong here. She might have done in her dreams but this was reality.

Without another word, she straightened her shoulders with a trace of faint pride and gripped David's arm, somehow managing to

walk to the massive front door with dignified grace. James was there holding both their coats with a bland expressionless face.

'Will you tell Martha I've taken Kris home?' David said quietly, doing his best to ignore Jason. He was still sitting with rigid stillness in his wheelchair, his haggard face white and strained.

Kristen looked back only once, her stricken eyes filled with a wounded humiliation she couldn't hide. Then she turned and walked away. It was finished. Two different worlds . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

LATE the next evening, Kristen sat staring into the dying embers on the hearth. Steven was asleep upstairs and Aunt Martha was again staying overnight at the manor. A book was lying open on David's lap as he sat opposite her in one of the cosy armchairs. It should have been a contented scene but Kristen's mind was -too full of conflicting turmoil. If only she could have done something to help Jason. But she had gone about it all wrong. Berating herself, her mind whirled.

Firmness was all right for some, she remembered from her work at the rehabilitation clinic, but perhaps Jason would have responded better to a gentle coaxing or a sympathetic empathy. There were so many ways to go about it. The trouble was she would never get another chance now. She, better than anyone, knew, what he was going through and she hadn't been able to help. Oh, it was so unfair. Why did it have to happen to him, a man of such immense pride?

Her own pride had taken a beating but after she thought about it she realised he was only speaking the truth. Their marriage never would have worked once she knew he was a wealthy lord who took his way of life for granted. She pictured him walking through his beautiful home and knew she could never belong there with him. It was ludicrous but oh, for just one tempting moment, she had let herself dream again.

A small sigh escaped her and David looked up, his mouth twisting with compassion. 'I thought I told you not to think about it. Jason didn't mean what he said, you know. It was just his way of getting rid of you so you wouldn't pity him.'

'He meant it,' she murmured. 'He's a wealthy lord.'

'And you're the lady who loves him.'

'He told me I'd get over it. Maybe I will now.' Her smile was bitter.

'You're a fool if you let his wealth come between you. It didn't make any difference before.'

'But I didn't know then. I thought he was just an ordinary man who had to work for a living the same as I did.'

'He is an ordinary man, Kris. Can't you see he'll grasp at anything to make you leave. He doesn't want your pity. He didn't succeed with telling you Emma was his wife so he suddenly came up with this little gem. Don't let it get to you.' He got up and kicked viciously at a log and watched the sparks shoot up the chimney as he jammed his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. 'I wish you were the hard little gold-digger I thought you were. Anything would be better than seeing you like this.'

She twisted her hands in her lap and stared at the fire. 'If only I could have helped him. But he's so different from before. I didn't know how to reach him. And I thought I loved him,' she said ruefully. 'Now I find I never really knew him at all. How could I love a man I didn't even know?'

'You can help him,' he said with a rough yet gentle determination. 'But only if you never stop loving him.'

'Oh, David. Maybe I'm not supposed to love him. Don't you see? Maybe that's why there are all these obstacles in the way.'

'You sound like you believe in Fate, Kris. I believe in it, too. We'll just have to wait and see what it has in store for us.'

In the middle of January, Fate stepped in and took everything out of their hands.

Kristen was asleep when she thought she heard something. It sounded like a low growl or whimpering. Shaggy? And then all she could hear was the wild banging of her heart. Trying to sit up in her narrow bed, she couldn't focus her eyes in the strange thick darkness. She blinked at the stinging sensation in her eyes and nose and began to choke before she finally realised what was wrong.

Smoke. It was thick and suffocating and a sudden panic caused her mind to go blank for a moment. Then she nearly fell out of bed, coughing violently, and ran to the door.

The hallway was hot and filled with eery layers of smoke. Turning back to her room, she grabbed one of her sweaters and wadded it up in a ball to press against her nose and mouth before groping her way down the hallway. There was no fire here yet but when she approached the stairway she saw a hungry yellow wall of flames steadily climbing up to her.

'Aunt Martha! David! Wake up! Fire!' She tried to scream but strangely, the words came out in a hoarse croak.

She found herself outside Aunt Martha's room and tried to open the door but it wouldn't budge. The handle was slippery in her grasp and she pounded until her fists hurt, trying to rouse her. Then David suddenly loomed beside her, coughing harshly as his shoulder slammed against the rough wood.

'Steven?' he choked before ramming against the door again.

'I tried you and Aunt Martha first.'

'Go get him. I'll get your aunt. Bring him to your room.' He barked the orders between gasping coughs as he looked over his shoulder and saw the greedy flames licking the staircase. 'We'll have to go out through your window. Hurry!'

Steven wouldn't wake up when she called out and shook him none too gently. The smoke was even thicker in here and her eyes were streaming as she quickly wrapped him in a blanket and carried him to the door. Shaggy was lying motionless on the floor beside the bed and she nearly tripped over him.

'I'll be back for you, Shaggy,' she croaked before cradling an unconscious Steven in her arms.

In her room, David was letting a dazed and disoriented Martha out the window, hanging precariously from knotted sheets. 'Hold on, Martha. You can do it. We're not that high up.' He gasped as the stinging cold air cleared his throat for a moment. 'Kris?' He turned towards her as she came in with Steven. 'Close the door.'

'Not yet.' She dumped his son in his arms. 'I've got to go back for Shaggy.'

'There isn't time.'

But she didn't hear him. She was fighting her way back through the now flaming hallway, trying to get Shaggy. He was still lying where she left him. 'Come on, boy. You saved all of us. You can't give up now.'

He whimpered softly and life came flickering back into him as he tried to get to his feet. 'You can do it, Shaggy,' she coughed harshly. On her hands and knees, she pushed and pulled, choking as she inched her way through the thick billowing black soot. She couldn't see where she was going and she had swallowed so much

smoke she found herself becoming dizzy and disoriented but she knew it would be fatal to stop.

In what seemed like hours she found the door to her room. David had already lowered Steven outside and she could hear the loud roar of fire behind her.

'Now, Kris!' David yelled and without quite knowing how, she found herself out the window, sliding haphazardly down the sheet, followed by David with a hairy furry bundle thrown over his shoulder.

Just as they all moved a safe distance away from the house, a screaming, tearing sound shattered the cold night-time silence as the steep roof collapsed in a blazing roar-. They stood gasping, stricken, filling their lungs with sharp clear air and by the time Steven was conscious and breathing normally again, there was nothing left in front of them but a blackened stone shell of a house.

Kristen stood beside her aunt in the smoke-filled darkness and shivered more from reaction than the cold. They all were in their bare feet and nightclothes with the exception of David. He had donned his jeans and boots but he was shirtless .and the cold January air was beginning to whip through them now that the fire had nothing left to feed on and was rapidly burning itself out.

They heard the crunch of tyres on gravel and turned numbly, looking past a small knot of neighbouring farmers who had come too late to be of any real help. A long sleek car pulled up behind them and even before it came to a full stop, Emma was jumping out.

'Are you all right? Oh, David!' She threw herself into his arms and sobbed hysterically. 'Jason wasn't able to sleep tonight. He saw the

smoke from his window—he sent me here to make sure you weren't—that all of you—that you—'

'Shh, Emma. We're all safe. Shh.' He rocked her gently within the circle of his strong arms, her tears making ragged white paths down the strong sooty wall of his chest.

Martha crept unsteadily over to Emma and made a brave attempt to keep her voice from quivering. 'Do you think his lordship could put us up for the night until we can decide what to do?' She smiled brightly from one to the other of them in the bright glare of the headlights and then fell in a dead faint at their feet.

In the confusion that followed, Kristen wasn't aware of Jason watching her as she helped David settle Aunt Martha on a plush velvet sofa in his drawing room. On her knees, she turned to accept a cold compress from James and spotted him sitting in his wheelchair quite close to her.

For a second she could only stare at him, then she shivered, knowing she couldn't throw herself into his arms as Emma had done to David. Her mouth opened soundlessly and her eyes were full of mute appeal.

There was no longer the air of defeat about him even though it must have bothered him not to be able to take an active part in their rescue. He didn't look quite so haggard and his thick black hair had been cut to a shorter, more human length. She wondered if it was really possible he was sitting straighter and had he actually gained back some weight? A noticeable flash of relief was there in his bleak silvery eyes before an invisible shutter closed over them. He didn't say anything and when he tilted his head back she could see a faint haughtiness steal over him as he let his gaze slowly roam up and down her body.

That look sent a wave of sudden heat, to her face and she was filled with mortification when she realised she was clad only in a white flannel nightgown streaked with long muddy fingers of soot and grime. Her face was dirty and her hair was wild in smoke-scented disorder.

David was standing stiffly beside Emma, his arm tightly around her as if in protection and Steven was on the floor beside him, huddled in a warm blanket, clutching a much subdued Shaggy.

'Dr Simmons is on his way,' Jason said quietly, at last. 'What seems to be the trouble with Martha?'

As if on cue, she moaned and blinked several times before trying to sit up, but a wave of giddiness sent her back on to the pale blue cushions.

'Aunt Martha?' Kristen pressed the cold cloth to her head.

'It's not my head, dear,' she said faintly. 'I think I broke my shoulder. Imagine, climbing out windows at my age.'

'Be glad it was only your shoulder, Martha,' Jason said with a sudden curious roughness to his voice. 'You—all of you were fortunate. It could have been so much worse.' Then he snapped at Emma. 'Will you find rooms for them? I'm sure they'd like to put the boy to bed and try to get some sleep themselves. There'll be a lot to do in the morning.' He swung his chair towards the door and irritably motioned for James to stay where he was. 'Let the doctor in when he comes for Martha,' he ordered.

In a crisis, Emma was surprisingly reliable. She quickly found rooms for them all and while David, bathed Steven before taking a shower himself, she helped Kristen make up the beds and settle them in with a minimum of fuss.

But Kristen couldn't rest that night even with the brandy James brought to her. He told her his lordship insisted she drink it while he waited to return the empty glass to him. It wasn't thoughts of the fire causing her restlessness or of their narrow escape. She had showered and washed her hair and long after it had dried, she found herself still pacing up and down the elegant bedroom.

Her steps were jerky, her bare feet soundless on the thick Aubusson carpet. The room was huge and, like the borrowed navy blue silk robe she wore, exquisite. The walls were covered in pale ivory damask, the French Provincial furniture dainty yet deceptively sturdy with touches of gilt on the intricately carved edges. Burnished gold drapes hung gracefully at the long windows and when she sank down on the edge of the bed covered with an ivory silk spread, she buried her face in her hands, feeling smaller and smaller with each passing second. This definitely was no place for her.

At breakfast the next morning she sat alone in the dining room, staring straight ahead with vacant eyes, a cup of coffee cooling on the table in front of her.

Aunt Martha tottered in, her arm in a thick plaster cast. Smiling tremulously, she took a seat next to her niece. 'Good morning, dear. Quite a contraption I've got here, isn't it?'

Kristen pulled herself together and immediately sympathised with her. 'Does it hurt much?'

'Not a bit now.' She put her good hand to her head and blinked in a slightly dazed fashion. 'But I suspect it's got something to do with the tablets the doctor gave me. Everything's spinning and I feel ridiculously like laughing.'

Kristen's eyebrows rose in surprise.

'That's what's so stupid,' she went on. 'Nothing's funny, really. I've lost my home. David was there earlier to check on the damage and he says everything's ruined. Completely gone. And now I'm about to lose my job as housekeeper here, too.'

'Why?'

'That's what we'd like to know too, Martha.' Emma pushed Jason's chair across the highly polished floor and put a lightly restraining hand on Martha's good arm, leaving Jason to position himself at the table by himself.

'I'm certainly no help to anybody with my arm like this.' She held it gingerly, a suspicion of moisture gathering in her eyes. 'The doctor said at least six weeks, maybe longer. Brittle bones at my age or some such nonsense. You'll simply have to hire another housekeeper and then you'll realise I'm not indispensable after all.'

'No—' Emma began to argue but Kristen cut her off.

'Don't worry, Aunt.' A sudden self-consciousness, knowing Jason was watching her, made her voice unnaturally high and strained. 'I'm sure Mum and Dad would love to have you come for an extended visit to recuperate. And it's been ages since you've seen the rest of the family. You'd like California this time of year.'

Emma turned accusing eyes on her. 'No! You can't take Martha away from us. We need her— and you. Jason, tell them they can't go.'

They all looked at him sitting stiffly erect. He wore a crisp pale blue shirt, open at the throat, and dark blue slacks. His hands rested lightly on the arms of his wheelchair, and his expression looked faintly bored. 'I can't stop them if they want to leave.'

'Jason!' Emma's hands curled at her sides.

Kristen tore her eyes away from the grim tightening of his jaw and resolutely kept her chin raised. What else did she expect? That he'd suddenly do a complete turn around and welcome them into his home with open arms?

'His lordship's right, dear,' Martha said crisply, hiding her disappointment. 'I think it's best if we stop imposing on his privacy and find other accommodation right away. No sense prolonging the inevitable.' She turned to Jason. 'If it's all right with you, before we go I'll ring the Duncan farm and see if Maude is able to come and look after you.'

'Duncan?' Emma wailed. 'Isn't Maude Duncan the woman I met at Christmastime? The one with all those daughters?'

Martha frowned. 'She has four. Lovely girls, all of them.'

'Each one more talented and beautiful than the others,' Emma said bitterly.

Martha was perplexed. 'What's that got to do with anything? They're a great help to her.'

'Oh, don't you see?' She dropped heavily on to a chair at the table. 'If Maude comes here to help out, she'll probably ask her daughters to come, too. They'll show David what great accomplishments they have and that'll put him more out of reach than ever.'

'I don't see how,' Martha said softly. 'He was going to see Mr Duncan this morning to ask if he and Steven could stay with them while he continues to care for the animals and decides what, if anything, can be done with the house.'

'What!' She looked horrified. 'He can't do that! He can stay here. There's room enough. Jason!' She turned accusing eyes on him. 'Say Something, for heaven's sake!'

He sat easily in his chair, faint boredom in his posture, eyeing her steadily. 'There isn't a thing I can do.'

'Oh—yes—there—is.' Each word was spoken precisely as Emma rose to her feet, icily calm facing him. 'He'll stay if you ask him.'

He met her cold challenge with unnerving silence.

'They'll all stay,' she said in a freezing voice. 'I can care for Steven and Kris can fake over Martha's duties for the time being. You know this house is big enough. Why, they're almost family!'

Still Jason remained silent, his wintry eyes suddenly seething.

'If you don't ask them to stay, Jason, I'll never speak to you again. I'll be twenty-five in three weeks and you won't be my guardian any more. I'll leave here and never come back.'

For a long moment there was complete silence in the room and all that could be heard was the tinkling chime of a clock in a distant room, the soft bark of a dog and Steven's muffled voice asking James where everyone was.

Finally Jason let out the breath he had been holding, an enigmatic look flickering across his face before he tilted his head to a haughty angle. 'I suppose this was inevitable. Well, Martha? You heard her. What do you think?'

'I don't know what to say!' she exclaimed. 'I'm sure there's more to this than just a question of letting us stay in your home. Maybe it's the medication I'm taking or it could be my imagination but the

air's so thick in here I could cut it with a knife. Do you want me to stay, sir?'

His jaw hardened when he glanced at Emma again. She hadn't moved. Her stance was still coldly uncompromising. 'I'm asking you to stay, Martha,' he said quietly.

'I'd like to, but I don't want to be a nuisance.'

'You wouldn't be,' he said flatly. He inclined his head then and couldn't keep his fists from clenching when he looked at Kristen. He regarded her silently for what seemed an interminable length of time and she couldn't read his expression. 'And you?' he said coldly. 'Will you stay—as housekeeper—until her shoulder mends?'

She bit her lip imagining the awkwardness that was bound to follow if she did, the tense strained silences, the lengths he'd have to take to avoid her. He didn't really want her here. His whole manner was coldly repudiating. She could almost hear his soundless shout to get out of his life all over again.

Emma sent her a withering look when she didn't answer him right away. 'Of course she'll stay!' she insisted. 'Come on, Kris, I'll show you where everything is in the kitchen so we can start breakfast. Just sit comfortably, Martha. For at least the next six weeks we'll wait on you.' She fastened her fingers roughly on Kristen's arm, ignoring her silent protest, and pushed her unceremoniously out of the room.

'What's the matter with you?' Emma groaned, pounding her fists on the big scrubbed table in the kitchen. 'This is the chance we've been waiting for!

Now you can live here in the same house with Jason and help him.'

'He doesn't want me here, Emma.'

She tossed her head impatiently, her red-gold curls flaming against her oatmeal-coloured wool dress. 'But you love him!'

'He told me love didn't mean anything. Maybe he's right. I can't stay here. Why did you have to give him that ultimatum?'

'Are you out of your mind? I thought you wanted to help him get well?'

Kristen turned away and mangled her bottom lip with her teeth. 'He doesn't want my help.'

'He might have said that but can't you see how much he's changed already? There's hope for him again. His whole attitude's different since he's seen you. And look at his appearance! His hair's been cut and he's not slumped in his chair any more. Ever since Christmas . . .' She stamped her foot angrily. 'You're not listening to a thing I'm saying. Don't you care?'

'I don't know what I feel any more. And don't you realise the distance between us?' She turned, holding out both her arms, looking down at the long blue silk robe she wore. It was folded nearly double around her slender figure. 'This is Jason's, isn't it?'

At Emma's nod, her eyes blazed green fire.

'I've never worn silk before. And I've never slept in a room as magnificent as the one you showed me to last night. Look at this place, Emma. And look at me. I don't belong here. I haven't got a stitch of clothing to call my own. It was all lost in the fire. At a fancy dinner party I wouldn't know which fork to use. I could never play "lady of the manor".'

'But you were going to marry him!'

'That was before I knew he was wealthy.'

'Now I've heard everything,' she said sarcastically. 'You and Jason are perfect for each other.' Her scorn dripped like ice. 'You know what your trouble is? Both of you? You've got too much pride. Jason doesn't want your pity and you don't want his charity. God! Doesn't his need outweigh your pride?'

Kristen felt empty inside. Whatever she and Jason might have shared, they were now at a point of impasse and there was nothing left to say.

'What does Aunt Martha usually serve for breakfast?' she sighed resignedly. 'I'll try to make these next six weeks as smooth as possible, then I'm going home.'

CHAPTER SIX

KRISTEN wasn't there when Jason asked David to stay but they must have come to some agreement because Emma couldn't hide her smug smile when they all sat down to dinner that evening.

The large formal dining room was a credit to Emma who insisted on helping Kris for the first couple of days. The table was exquisitely set with white damask, gleaming silver and shimmering crystal. A long low centrepiece was made of white tapered candles and spicy pine boughs which she and Steven had collected that afternoon.

David was quiet, sitting with barely hidden constraint in one of Jason's flawlessly cut black dinner jackets and white silk shirts. Emma purposely placed herself beside him and Steven was thrilled to be allowed to sit with them this once as he took his place next to Martha at the opposite side of the table.

'Isn't this cosy?' Emma grinned. 'For the first time in my life I feel as if I'm part of a real family. I just wish James and Alan would reconsider and eat in here with us, too.'

'I did ask, like you said,' Martha said shyly, beaming at her, 'but they preferred to stay in the kitchen where they'd be more comfortable.'

Kristen came in then, carrying a large bowl of browned potatoes and with an awkward jerky motion, set it on the table near Jason. 'Er—have I f-forgotten anything else?'

'No,' he said shortly, irritably flexing his shoulders, looking big and masterful in an impeccable dark dinner jacket. 'You've got enough here for a small army.' He was seated in a heavy oak chair

at the head of the table and just looking at him, it was hard to imagine he couldn't stand up and walk away with that unique grace and dignity that was so much a part of him. 'This isn't some state occasion, Kris. As Emma said, we're just one big happy family waiting for you to sit down so we can eat our dinner.' Sarcasm dripped from his voice.

Emma hadn't consulted Kristen when she planned the seating arrangements and Kristen's face flamed when she realised the only place left to sit was at the foot of the table. Her heart sank when she darted a look at Emma's smug face. To begin moving the place setting now, to a more appropriate position at the side, would be ridiculous. Deciding discretion was the better part of valour after all, she awkwardly subsided on to her chair.

No one said a word as bowls and plates were passed up and down the table. Even Steven was unusually silent as if he realised he shouldn't speak unless spoken to. The silence dragged on as Kristen miserably pushed the food around her plate, too nervous to swallow and too conscious of her unsuitability to relax. She felt hot all over. What am I doing here? she thought wildly. What if I spill something on the tablecloth, or worse, my lap?

Her fingers tightened on her fork when she nervously glanced up and saw Jason watching her with a deep scowl on his face. Her heart began to pound. Evidently something was expected of her—but what? 'I—er—I—haven't had a chance to thank you for—for the clothes you had Emma get us this afternoon—er—sir,' she stammered unsteadily, shattering the silence with the first thing that popped into her mind.

David seemed to choke on-his food and Emma stared at her.

Jason's face whitened. 'Think nothing of it.'

'Oh, yes. Thank you ever so much,' Martha echoed, glancing curiously from one to the other, not quite understanding all the swirling undercurrents here. 'We're very grateful. I've not had a dress this fine in ages.' She looked at the deep purple silk and grimaced at her cast. 'And the gown for my niece is beautiful. Emerald green is her colour, isn't it?'

'Emma chose them. Thank her,' he said irritably. 'If it had been up to me, I'd just as soon have kept Kris in my robe. It never looked that good on me.'

Martha's mouth opened soundlessly and then she noticed a dull red blush creeping up Kristen's neck.

'There's no disputing Emma's taste but your money paid for them,' Kristen argued chokingly, trying to find her scattered wits. 'As soon as everything's back to normal, we'll see that you're reimbursed.'

Jason set his knife and fork down and clenched his teeth, struggling to control his temper. 'If you like, I'll deduct it from your wages. I will be paying you a salary, you know.'

'If you'd rather,' she nodded, blithely agreeable. But she knew she'd better change the subject quick. 'Have you tried these green beans, sir? I understand they were grown in your very own garden and frozen at the peak of freshness.' Her smile was innocent as she passed the bowl up to him.

He looked as if he'd like to tell her what to do with the green beans, but he took them without another word and, with an effort, put some on his plate.

The meal dragged on interminably. Conversation was stilted and infrequent and when their coffee was finally finished, Kristen

thankfully escaped to the kitchen where she nearly collapsed in a relieved heap. If every meal was going to be like this, they were in for long bouts of indigestion. She prolonged washing dishes until she thought it must be obvious she was using the task to avoid everyone else. Drying her hands on a towel, she took off Aunt Martha's voluminous apron and straightened the soft material of her costly gown while scanning the spacious room to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. Then all at once she stopped dead.

Jason sat in his wheelchair in the doorway watching her and from his relaxed attitude, he had been there for some time.

'Did you want something—er—sir?' she said nervously.

Anger flared in his eyes. 'Why, Kris? Why the formality?'

Not misunderstanding him at all, she twisted her hands together as a swift tide of warm colour washed over her.

'Answer me!'

'I—I'm one of your servants now. Isn't it customary to call one's employer sir? Out of respect?'

His silvery eyes narrowed and became bleak. 'You're not my servant.'

'You asked me to stay in that capacity.'

'Do you think I wanted to?'

'No,' she said helplessly. 'I know you didn't. You were forced into it. And I didn't want to stay either. You've made it plain I don't belong here. Don't worry, the next six weeks can't pass soon enough for me. I'll be out of your life for good then.'

'That's not what I meant!' He awkwardly propelled his chair closer to her and it was all she could do to remain still. Spasms of pain crossed his face with each turn of the wheels. When he reached her, his sweating hand shot out to grip her wrist with vicelike strength. 'I won't have you grovel!'

Pride forced her head up and her teeth sank into her bottom lip to keep from crying out at the bruising pressure he applied to her bones, but she managed to keep her voice steady. 'I wasn't grovelling. When I thanked you for the clothes you bought, I tried to do it with dignity. And for the next six weeks I'll perform the tasks expected of a housekeeper to the best of my ability. Nothing more, nothing less.'

'I don't want you to be my housekeeper.'

'If I'm not satisfactory—'

A particularly loud oath made the words die in her throat as he jerked her wrist and brought her to her knees in front of him. 'You're deliberately misunderstanding me, Kris. You're my equal! So much so that I asked you to be my wife—until everything changed when I ended up in this.' His other hand clenched the arm of his chair and his voice roughened. 'I won't see you as my humble servant now, calling me sir, never forgetting for one minute I have a title and all the bloody restrictions that go with it!'

'But I mustn't ever forget it,' she whispered, close to tears.

His eyes flared as a slow steady flame ignited his anger. 'I won't have it!'

She looked up at him and was immediately filled with despair. Even though he was so far above her, her feelings hadn't changed. She was more in love with him now than ever, but somehow she

had to put a stop to it. 'I'm not doing this for you,' she said coldly. 'My aunt needs this position now that she's lost everything else that matters to her. I'll merely be filling in until she's able to resume her duties. As soon as she's well, I'll leave. For now, I'll try to stay out of your way. You won't even know I'm around.'

'Dammit, Kris!' He swore in frustration, his hands fastening roughly on her shoulders, dragging her close to his face so that their eyes locked. He kept looking at her as a slow thick silence settled between them. An intense longing crossed his face making her stomach contract and then with a low helpless groan, his mouth sought hers with hard possession.

At the touch of his lips, her brittle defence of pride splintered. Clinging to it with desperation, she tried to twist away from him to salvage it, but his arms firmly circled her back, easily enfolding her slim body, sending shudders along her spine as his kiss deepened.

His mouth was warm and persuasive, dispelling all her taut resistance, forcing her lips to open under his insistent demand. And then she was lost, mindlessly spinning into an oblivion of feeling where nothing else mattered but that they were together again.

Her explosive response was unconscious and it effectively shattered the last remnants of pride between them. Kristen leaned further towards him and she shudderingly gripped the back of his neck and shoulders to keep her balance. Her fingers slid through the thick silkiness of his hair, loving the feel of its strength as it clung to her hands, and a soft moan came from deep in her throat. 'Oh, Jason. Jason.'

How could she ever think of leaving him? He was here. He was now. He was hers. For mindless moments they belonged only to each other. Nothing else mattered. He wasn't his lordship and she wasn't his servant. He wasn't disabled. He was a man and she was a woman sharing an elemental emotion that went beyond the bonds of time and space and physical imperfections. He was Jason Caine and she loved him to distraction.

Ever so gently he eased his mouth from hers, watching her gold tipped lashes flicker open, glazed and incredulous. He smiled then and continued to study her before finally letting out a long shuddering sigh. 'It was always like this, remember?' he murmured softly, running his warm hands restlessly over her body. 'No distance between us, no chasm of class or wealth or pride. We were simply a man and a woman who loved each other to distraction.'

She quivered, looking at his brilliant smile, and all at once they were back on the empty rainswept beach in California. He had filled her whole world then. So tall and strong and full of life and laughter, he was like no one she had ever known before. He was charming, fascinating, so easy to talk to—and he wanted her. There was never any doubt about that.

'Yes, I remember,' she murmured huskily, looking straight into his smoky eyes. Her own were dark with emotion and she knew he was remembering, too.

'You loved me then,' he muttered, his face helplessly moving in a caress against her hair.

'I've always loved you, Jason.' She was trembling. The pitch of his voice, the strength of his touch, the warm male scent of his body filled her with unbearable yearning and in an instant she was in his

lap, clinging to him blindly, her body melting against the lean strength of his.

'Kris. Kris.' Her name was a plea.

'Yes,' she answered, a sweet warmth welling up inside her. Her fingers unconsciously fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, possessively curling into his damp skin.

'Sometimes I lie awake at night remembering. You always had so much to give. Oh God, Kris!' He shook his head, burying his face in her neck and she felt him shudder. Then he raised his face to gaze at her. His hands fastened on her upper arms as he lifted her off his lap and set her away from him. 'This is insanity,' he said with an unsteady quivering voice. 'It isn't enough! We can't go back.'

Something inside her wept for the despairing look on his face but deep down she knew he was right. Their eyes met and for one brief instant they both knew. The love they shared was hopeless. It was an odd moment of closeness that needed no words and then his eyes became shuttered and expressionless.

'I love you, Jason. No matter where I go or what I do, you'll have that to remember.'

'It's no good,' he said raggedly.

'I know.' Her chin came up and she blinked rapidly to keep her tears from falling. 'It never would have worked but I can't stop loving you.' Humiliation and pain and rage trembled through her but she stood regally still, her back rigid with pride, and after a moment all she could see through the watery shimmer was the back of Jason's wheelchair as it disappeared through the doorway.

Her days settled into a smooth pattern and her life resumed a sedate pace. When she saw Jason at mealtimes, he was polite but aloof and she was the same. It surprised her to find that once she quelled her feelings of inferiority, running this enormous mansion was much the same as caring for Aunt Martha's little farmhouse.

'The work is actually the same,' Martha told her one evening after dinner. She put her feet up on a small stool while Kristen finished the dishes. 'It's just on a much larger scale here. When you walk into a room, don't let its proportions scare you. Take it step by step and you'll be surprised at what you can accomplish.'

Kristen dried her hands, smiling tiredly. She poured a cup of tea for both of them before sitting down at the well scrubbed table. 'At first I resented J—er, his lordship—hiring back all the people who used to work here. I thought it was because he didn't think I was capable of handling the job. Now I'm grateful for the help.'

'I told you it was a big job, dear. Before we came to stay, more than half the rooms were closed off and his lordship rarely budged from his study. There could have been dust an inch thick and he wouldn't have noticed it.'

'Now he notices everything, doesn't he? I've seen your face when you've caught him watching me.'

Martha gave her a long considering look before a small smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. 'I'd have to be blind not to see how aware he is of you, but I'm sure it isn't because of the way you keep house. You're a pretty girl, if a trifle too thin. He seems drawn to you in some way. And then there was that remark of his that he liked seeing you in his robe.' She blushed at the thought.

'Do you suppose it's because the two of you share a common brush with a crippling disability?'

'How could it be that?' she exclaimed. 'You promised me you'd never say anything to anybody about it.'

'And I haven't, dear. But I don't know why you're so intent on keeping it such a secret. You overcame great odds. You were supposed to lose that leg but you showed them. You could be such a source of inspiration to him. Especially now.'

She stopped short. 'Now?'

'James was telling me his lordship saw the doctor today.'

She stiffened. 'Why? Did something happen to him? Is he all right?'

Martha remained unruffled,, slowly sipping her tea, while Kristen struggled to control the irrational thudding of her heart. A slight glimmering twinkle in Martha's eyes was the only sign that she thought Kristen's behaviour odd. 'It seems his lordship's twinges of pain are getting worse as well as more frequent. But he still continues to refuse to let James take him to a doctor. This afternoon he had no choice. When the doctor came to see me, James had him look in on his lordship, too.'

Kristen grimaced knowing how Jason must have hated being thwarted. 'And?'

'The doctor thinks it's a favourable sign. It's all a part of the healing process, he says. So you see? You could help him so much.'

'How?'

'James says when the doctor suggested therapy to speed things up, he refused to even consider it.'

'But why? If it might help him . . .'

'I don't know what might be going on in his mind. He's a very unhappy man lately. If you told him about all those years of therapy you've got behind you, he might listen.'

'Was the doctor specific about it? The therapy, I mean.'

'I understand he was quite adamant. He called James into the room and showed him several light exercises to start with, but you don't know how stubborn the man can be. He out and out refused.'

She bit her lip, shaken. 'It sounds as if he doesn't want to walk again.'

'That's what I thought, too.' She frowned. 'When I asked James, he said his lordship was through with having his hopes shattered. He wasn't about to try therapy and be disillusioned when it didn't change anything.'

Her eyes darkened. 'That's absurd. He should at least give it a try.'

'I'll bet it has something to do with that girl he was going to marry. Remember, I told you about it when you first came here? I don't think he's ever quite got over her. Maybe he's afraid she'll reject him again even if he could walk. Or maybe she's gone and married someone else and he's given up hope. You might be just the one to take his mind off her. Why don't you try, dear?'

Two huge tears stood in her eyes as Martha looked at her with startled confusion. 'Oh, Aunt Martha! I never rejected him!' she burst out. 'He didn't tell me what happened. If I'd known, I'd have

stayed with him and tried to help him. Instead, he told me he was married so I wouldn't see him again—so I wouldn't pity him!"

Martha's jaw dropped. 'Are you saying . . .?'

'Yes. I'm the girl he was going to marry last year but he called it off without telling me why. I never dreamed he'd been hurt. And I certainly never knew he was a wealthy lord. I came here to you to try to get over him. Ironical, isn't it? Look at me. I've ended up in his house!'

'Why, why, I never knew,' she sputtered. 'I thought there was something between you but I never. . .'

Kristen scrubbed at her tears with an impatient gesture. 'There's nothing between us any more. I don't belong here.'

'You've always belonged here!' she said fervently. 'Remember your dreams when you were little? And you love him!'

'That's got nothing to do with it.'

'Oh yes it has. Love imposes its own obligations. The greater your love, the greater the obligation. You've got to help him whether you want to or not now or you'll never rest. You'll always wonder if you might have changed his life if you'd helped him at this time. He may not want to listen to you, but you have a duty to try to convince him to start therapy.' She rose and went to the sink to rinse her cup and didn't see the bitter twist to Kristen's mouth.

Duty, Kristen thought miserably. He didn't want her help and she was afraid to offer it and have it thrown back at her.

Not until a week later did she have the opportunity to speak to him about it.

One afternoon, during the short lull. before starting dinner, she quietly slipped outside for a brisk walk. It had become the habit of years and now she used this time to clear her mind as well as exercise her leg. As she set out, she lifted her face to the late January sky and grimaced. It was snowing, heavily and wetly in big fat flakes, and the footing would be treacherous but she pushed herself to cover the short distance to her aunt's blackened farmhouse rather than stay in the snug warmth of Jason's mansion brooding on her obligation to him. Love was an unwelcome imposition, she found.

There was a sheltered place on a low empty window ledge and she sank down on it to catch her breath before beginning the trek back. The wind had picked up, whipping the snow into deepening drifts, but she sat and let her eyes wander far across the gently rolling fields, seeking solace in the tranquil whitening beauty of the countryside.

James had told her only this morning to enjoy this fluke while it lasted. Usually there was very little snow in this area. It always rained at this time of year and he said the tobacco farmers must be having fits. Snow was one thing they didn't need.

It .wouldn't be long before it was time to begin ploughing for the spring planting. But there was some question of what Aunt Martha would do with her land now. She had an offer from a neighbouring farmer and was seriously thinking of taking it. His lordship told her she had a home with him for as long as she wanted to stay and since the old stone farmhouse was nothing more than a blackened shell now, it made sense to sell the land to someone else. It would cost too much, in time as well as money, to start all over again. Aunt Martha wasn't getting any younger and David had mentioned a few times that he wanted to return to Cornwall. He said he missed the coast and the strong earthy people who lived there.

Kristen jabbed her toe into a small mound of snow and sighed miserably. I'm the only one with no direction. I keep floundering, waiting for something to happen instead of taking charge of my own life. I'll go back to California, she thought with a spurt of sudden determination. I'll get a good job and I definitely won't write long letters to Aunt Martha and wait impatiently for her answers in the hope that she'll tell me something about his lordship. In a few short weeks I'll never see him again ...

'Kris?'

Her thoughts were so vivid and had taken her so far she blinked and shook her head in a slightly dazed fashion. 'Oh hello, David.'

He stood several feet away from her, a sack of feed hoisted on to his shoulder. 'What are you trying to do? Catch pneumonia?'

'Not at all,' she smiled self-consciously. 'I'm dressed far too warm to catch anything. See?' She held out her arms.

Her coat was bright blue nylon filled with down and she wore knee-length black boots with her jeans tucked into them.

'I'm glad you stopped fighting Jason about buying your clothes,' he said quietly. 'You look beautiful.'

She blushed at the unexpected compliment. 'I'm keeping track of everything and when I get home and find a good job, he's getting back every cent he paid.'

David just shook his head knowing better than to argue. 'There's at least an inch of snow on you. Been here long?'

She jumped to her feet guiltily. 'What time is it?'

'Almost five-thirty.'

'Oh no,' she groaned. 'Aunt Martha will wonder where I am. I was only going to come here and back. I must have lost track of the time.'

'Slow down, Kris.' He set the sack in a relatively sheltered spot and brushed the snow off the window ledge to take a seat beside her. 'Sit down and talk to me for a minute. If I know Martha, she'll have one of the other girls start things in the kitchen. That's what they're there for. She knows you never go far.'

Reluctantly she sank back on the window ledge.

'It seems we never talk any more,' he said in a deep quiet voice before shaking snow off his hat. He ran his hand through his bright hair before resettling the hat on his head. 'The days are so short and you're always so busy.'

'Not any busier than you are.'

'But you're trying to do it all single-handedly, Kris. At least I have help—and I'm not too proud to let them give me that help when I need it.'

She dug her boots deeper into a mound of snow, keeping her head bent. 'It keeps my mind off things when I'm busy.'

'You ought to get out more. Go with Emma on her trips to visit the neighbours. The Amish are friendly though they don't advertise their lifestyle. Emma marvels at the way they can do without cars or electrical appliances or even mirrors. She's quite friendly with one family and I'm hoping some of their customs might rub off on her.' His face creased into an impish grin. 'I'm not saying she's about to join their religion, mind you. But she takes so much for

granted, just seeing how they live might do her some good. Why don't you go with her next time and see what I mean? You need something just to break the monotony of your days.'

She sighed. 'It doesn't matter. I'll only be here for a little while longer then I'm going back home.'

'When Martha's shoulder is better?'

Her head bobbed up and down with a decisive nod. 'I won't be needed then and I can't stay where I don't belong.'

He looked her full in the face for a long moment and when he finally spoke, his voice was husky. 'You know, Kris, some people use money as a weapon, others think of it as a trap. I never thought you'd let it be a stumbling block to your and Jason's happiness.'

Her expressive green eyes were intent on the brightness of his. 'He's a very wealthy man, David. The realisation sinks in more and more each day.'

'It's no reason to leave him. Do you think he's happy with all his money?'

'Yes. I believe he is. He's doing what he wants to do.'

'He'd trade it all for a chance to walk again.'

'No he wouldn't!' she said angrily, pushing herself to her feet, her eyes full of bright green sparks. 'He's supposed to exercise but he won't even try. He's given up!'

'Then help him,' he said harshly. 'You're the only one who can. You've got to talk to him, get him to see reason.'

'He doesn't want my help.'

'He *needs* your help. If you love him enough—'

'Not you too!' she cried. 'Aunt Martha keeps telling me I have an obligation to help him but he won't accept it from me. Surely you can see that? You've seen him at dinner. He sits there but his mind is a million miles away. If it weren't for you and Emma and Aunt Martha, there'd be no conversation at all.'

He nodded grimly. 'You're right.' He rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully and adjusted his heavy leather gloves. 'You'll just have to do it without letting him know.' He smiled, rolling to his feet, brushing snow off his coat. He stood tall and solidly in the snow, his eyes twinkling. 'You women do that all the time while you make us think we've accomplished things all by ourselves. I'll take care of Steven tonight and have Emma take Jason to the library instead of his usual place in his study after dinner. Arrange to go there and talk to him, will you?'

'He won't listen to me.'

'Is this Kristen Thorne talking?' He put his big gloved hand under her chin and concern flickered across his handsome face. 'Time is running out. If you love him as much as I think you do, you won't let a case of stubborn pride stand in the way of his chance to walk again.'

'What makes you think it's pride?' she choked, her lips stiff.

'I know Jason. Give him this chance. You're really the only one who can.'

Was she? Somehow she doubted it but if he was right, she owed it to him to try.

CHAPTER SEVEN

No ONE was in the library that evening. Nervously straightening the waistband of her long black velvet skirt, she tucked in her white lace blouse with shaking hands and wondered if Jason had already come and gone. It hadn't been a conscious effort on her part to take so much time cleaning up the kitchen, but she needed to rehearse what to say when she saw him.

With a small sigh she restlessly trailed her fingers over the backs of the books on the wide oak shelves running from floor to ceiling. They were like comforting old friends who spoke of faraway places and lofty ideals, of love's promise and life's mysteries.

Of all the rooms in this huge house, she liked this one the best. It was just as she had pictured it all those years ago when she roamed through the ruins with her brothers. Now a small glowing fire was burning in the black marble fireplace. No lamps were lit yet and the fire provided the only source of light in the room. An ornate gilt-framed mirror on the dark panelling above the fireplace flickered with her dim reflection. Tall wide windows with heavy draperies of rich burgundy brocade looked out on to the snowswept fields shimmering in the moonlight, each frozen tree branch plated with crystallised silver.

Everything was silent as she looked at the tufted burgundy leather wing chairs. Small tables with practical reading lamps stood near them. The floor was highly polished oak parquetry which she knew had been covered once with a thick dark Persian carpet. Aunt Martha told her it was removed after his lordship's chair had overturned one day as he had tried to push himself closer to the hearth instead of calling for James to help him.

'Almost burned, he was,' she had said.

Her hands clenched miserably when she pictured it.

Just then she heard Jason's voice and without thinking, she slipped into the shadows away from the flickering fireplace.

'... I don't know why you won't take no for an answer, Emma,' he was saying. 'And why are you bringing me here? Take me to my study.'

Ignoring him, she pushed his chair into position in front of the hearth before turning on several lamps close to them. 'It's much cosier in here and I feel better able to approach you when you're in this room. It mellows you somehow. You haven't given me a good reason for not having a party.'

'Don't you realise how much extra work it'll mean for Kris?'

'You've hired all those other servants to help her,' she argued reasonably. 'It's not as if she has to do everything by herself.'

He irritably loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt before running a finger inside the stiff white collar. 'Leave it, Emma. I'm not in the mood to continue this argument.'

'How can I leave it? Tomorrow's my birthday.'

'Invite a few of your friends in for tea if you like. You don't have to throw a lavish party.'

'What kind of guardian are you?' she wailed, stamping a graceful foot in spiky high-heels, sending her red-gold curls swirling about her angry face and her royal-blue gown shimmering in the firelight. 'I'll be twenty-five, an heiress in my own right, no longer dependent on you. You'll be free at last. I'd have thought you'd want to shout it from the roof-top.'

He let out an exasperated breath and ran his hands through his hair. 'For a girl who's come of age, you're singularly lacking in common sense. Can't you see what an unnecessary burden you'll be putting on Kris?'

'What's it to you, anyway? It's not as if she's anything special. She's being paid to do this sort of thing. You don't love her any more. You've made that more than clear to everybody.'

'It's enough that I cared for her at one time,' he said shortly.

From her position in the shadows, Kristen saw the darkening anger on his chiselled face and shuddered, a thin wrenching pain running through her. It was time to make her presence known but for the life of her, she couldn't move.

'A party won't be any trouble for her. She can cook and clean as well as Martha ever could. She's a great housekeeper.'

'It's all a front, Emma. Can't you see how hard she struggles? And she must have hurt herself. I've seen her limping.'

'Are you sure?' she frowned. 'She had a snowball fight with Steven and me this afternoon, before she went for a walk, and I didn't notice anything.'

'That's another thing. What are you going to do with the boy while you're partying? You made a bargain to take care of him.'

'His name is Steven. And Kris said she'd keep him with her in the kitchen and put him to bed when it was time.'

'And you'd let her do it!' he said with incredulous surprise at her thoughtlessness. 'With all she'd have to do for a party, you'd push a four-year-old boy on her, too?'

'Why not?' Her voice rose shrilly with temper. 'He's no trouble. He's a well-mannered little boy. You'd know it if you ever took the time to talk to him. Even your dog is crazy about him and he doesn't take to just anybody now that you've banished him from your side.'

He looked at her with sudden smouldering anger that took on a quality of menace. 'I don't want to talk about David's son.'

'He's Judith's too, don't forget. She meant a lot to you at one time—'

His fists bunched in his lap. '*Emma!*'

'Don't do this, Jason. However much Judith hurt you when she chose David over you, don't take it out on her son. You'd like him if you ever got to know him. He's a lot like Judith—'

'You don't know when to stop, do you?'

'It's not good to keep things inside and let them fester. If you'd have it out with David, you'd clear the air and get it out of your system.'

'I don't want to talk about Judith or David or their son.' His tone was clipped. 'It's enough you forced me to extend my hospitality to them.'

'I can't keep Steven away from you forever,' she said with a toss of her head. 'He's curious about you. Do you know he had it in his mind that you were some kind of ogre? He was scared to death the first night he came to stay. Now he realises you're merely a lonely man just like his father.'.

He raked his hands over his face and stared into the hungry flames curling around the logs. Then he dropped them to his lap, his long sensitive fingers lifeless in the flickering reflection of the flames. After a moment he lifted his head and gave a short jarring laugh, but his mouth was a grim taut line of pain.

Kristen bent her head down, her eyes squeezing tightly shut. Seeing him like this was unbearably sad but there was nothing she could do. She wished she hadn't eavesdropped. She was hearing things she had no right to hear.

When they had first met, Jason told her he had been engaged but it hadn't worked out. The girl married someone else. Now she realised it must have been Judith, David's wife. It explained so much, why there were so many ill feelings between them, but how could she stand here in the shadows of his library, eavesdropping on a private conversation? It was so vulgar. These things didn't concern her any more.

With the utmost stealth, she backed away further into the shadows until she felt the panelling cold against her back, inching her way along the wall. There was no way she could make her presence known now. It was too long past the time when she could have done so. If she could only find a place to hide until they left the room, she'd make sure she forgot everything she heard.

Taking advantage of Jason's sudden look of vulnerability, Emma pounced. 'May I have a party? Please? Kris is willing. Martha'll organise everything and tell her what needs to be done and we'll stay out of your way. This house is big enough. You won't even know it's going on if you don't want to come.'

'I don't care what you have,' he said with a short ragged sigh. It was a sound of total defeat. 'Just quit badgering me.'

'Thanks, Jason!' She flung her arms around his neck and dropped a kiss against his cold cheek, quickly stepping to the side of his chair when he flinched away. 'You weren't really so bad a guardian,' she grinned. 'Arrogant, insensitive, overbearing, but not so bad. Goodnight, cousin dear.' And then she made her escape before he could change his mind.

For a long moment Kristen could only hear the fierce drumming of her heart, her head bent to study the dim outline of her shoes against the polished floor. There was complete silence until the faint sound of ashes falling in the grate reached her ears.

When she lifted her head, she froze.

Jason sat stiffly forward, his hands tightly gripping the sides of his chair, his eyes locked with hers in the mirror above the hearth.

'How long have you been there?' he growled in an icy voice that matched the frozen scene outside the window.

'Too long,' she gulped, pushing herself away from the wall with clammy hands, forcing herself forward to stand in front of him and meet his merciless eyes without cringing. 'I knew I should tell you but I didn't know how.'

He lifted his head, loathing in every line of his taut, powerful body. 'I thought you were above petty eavesdropping.'

'I didn't mean to do it.' Her shoulders hunched. 'It just happened.'

'I see,' he said sarcastically. 'And it also just happened that Emma brought me here instead of to my study. God!' He slammed his hands against the arms of his chair. 'I'm as helpless as a puppet with strings, at the mercy of whoever chooses to push this chair!'

'You can do something about it if you really want to.'

He stiffened abruptly. 'What do you suggest? "Take up thy bed and walk"?' Sarcasm dripped from his voice.

'No, Jason. I don't think you could do that. Those people had faith. You haven't any.'

'What do you know about it?'

'You've refused to even consider therapy,' she said baldly.

'I should have known!' he burst out angrily. His breath was harsh in his throat as he dragged his hands through his hair and roughly bunched them at the back of his neck. 'All right, Kris, give me the speech you must have prepared, then get out of my sight.'

'Why should I waste my breath? You aren't ready to listen. What are you afraid of?'

He didn't answer her. His tortured eyes stayed riveted to the fire behind her.

'Isn't it worth a try?'

'Do you think I haven't tried?' he said with loathing. 'Do you have any idea what it's like to pull yourself out of a wheelchair, hoping to stand upright—only to fall flat on your face? I've lost track of the times I've struggled to get myself back into the chair before James would come in and find me on the floor.'

A faint shudder passed through her at the picture he described. It wasn't right that his tall powerful body should be twisted helplessly at his servant's feet. 'You can't expect it to happen that

way,' she said in a faltering, wobbly voice. 'You have to have massage and slowly progressing exercises before you can stand.'

'What do you know about it?' His rudeness cut her. 'You've never lost the use of your legs. You've never had to sit in a wheelchair. You've never had to look up at people so that after a while the back of your neck aches with the strain of it. Don't give me any platitudes about faith and courage, Kris. I don't want to hear it!'

The bitter rage in his voice stirred her terribly. His eyes pinned her with a look of defeated torture that shattered through her. She couldn't breathe. Why did this have to happen to such a proud, arrogant man? It only made it that much more difficult to reach him.

'Oh, but I do know all about it, Jason.' Her voice shook as the words came out of their own accord. All her carefully rehearsed speech went right out the window. 'You don't honestly think you're the only one who's ever been in this position? Haven't you ever wondered why I wear slacks or jeans or long skirts all the time? I spent half my life in a wheelchair!'

He threw his head back haughtily and stared at her, not quite believing.

And then she showed him.

She slowly lifted her long velvet skirt to the middle of her right thigh and waited for the shock of it to sicken him.

Stretching in a network of drunken cobwebby lines, thick scar tissue covered an otherwise shapely leg. The skin gleamed with a grotesque whiteness and pale holes followed the livid streaks at the sides where the skin had been stitched. It was ugly and it must

have been painful, a grim reminder of all the years she had spent overcoming the greatest odds that she would never walk again.

She heard his swiftly indrawn breath before he tore his eyes away and fastened them on her face.

'Don't look at me like that,' she said coldly, dropping the hem of her skirt before turning away from him, stretching her hands to the fire. 'I don't want your pity, either.'

He let out a ragged breath. 'I didn't know—you never told me. What do you want me to say?'

'Say you'll start therapy. If I could do it, you ought to be able to.'

His voice was suddenly hesitant, almost breathless. 'How did it happen?'

She walked to a chair and sank down into the soft dark leather without looking at him. 'It was a bone disease,' she said dispassionately. 'It started with a tractor accident when I was six. Aunt Martha lost her husband and I nearly lost my leg. When I was ten, they wanted to take it, but I wouldn't let them. I chose years of surgery instead.'

After an eternity *of* time she heard Jason's chair glide silently across the floor to a low cabinet. He came back with two small squat glasses and a bottle in his lap before pouring a drink for her and then one for himself.

'What shall we drink to?' he said grimly, handing her a glass with taut white fingers. 'Each other? Two cripples? One who made it and one who didn't?'

She jerked her head back and clenched her jaw, feeling as if he had reached out and slapped her. Bitter green sparks flashed in her eyes as hope faded only to be replaced by a seething anger. 'The least you could do is try!'

'And if I do? In another few weeks you'll be gone. It'll just be time wasted.'

She stiffened, drawing in a shaking breath. 'But you'll be doing it for you—not for me. Nothing will be wasted.'

The quiet swish of wheels brought him closer to her. He looked at her so intently his eyes burned right through her. Then he turned his arrogant head and stared into the fire for long silent minutes. When he finally looked back, his eyes were bleak and deep bluish lines of strain were etched at the sides of his mouth. '*Will you help me?*'

Reaction shuddered through her making her whole body tremble. She knew what it cost him to ask her that. It was an affront to his fierce pride, his innate dignity and arrogant strong-willed independence. She couldn't stem the deep compassion welling up and there was no way to stop her voice from shaking when she tried to answer him. 'There's really very little I can do, Jason. You're the one who'll have to do all the work and it won't be easy.'

He held out his hand to her and it took no effort to place her own in his. Sudden wondrous hope surged through her when he crushed it warmly between both of his, allowing a silent vibrant strength to course between them.

All obstacles were swept away in that moment. In her mind she could hear again the muted roar of the ocean as the rain pummelled them with splashing wet fingers. She could hear again the way his voice shook when he asked her to marry him. They

had been as close in spirit then as they were now. Her face glowed and her heart was filled to bursting with all the love she couldn't contain.

'I don't expect it to be easy,' he said hoarsely, his deep voice shattering the silence, 'but I—*need*. you, Kris.'

She stared at him for a long minute, a suggestion of terrible pain snaking through her. A forerunner, she thought as he crushed her hand in his. We'll be working so closely together it will only make it that much harder to leave him when he's able to walk again. *I can't do it!* The thought screamed through her mind for one selfish instant. But she knew she had to help him. How could she deny him anything? Love made it impossible to say no.

He sat before her, his face pale, a curious muted pain in his silvery eyes, all their unspoken love and longing between them.

Her senses cried out to him but she knew her place. 'Yes. I'll be here, Jason,' she choked. 'I'll help you in any way I can.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE next day, Kristen divided her time between helping the servants ready the house for Emma's birthday party and setting up a room for Jason's physical therapy. Emma had taken the liberty of inviting everyone she knew, even her most brief acquaintances, several weeks before. All of them had accepted and it hadn't bothered Emma one bit that she hadn't asked Jason's permission until the night before. She was that sure of him.

A warm glow settled around Kristen's heart every time she thought about his finally consenting to take an active part in his recovery. Never at any time had she felt complacent and now she only hoped he would be successful. He had too much to offer to waste it all brooding away by himself. It wasn't going to be easy but perhaps she could give him moral support as well as the physical therapy. Her mind raced ahead and she could see him standing, walking, running! Her heart swelled when she pictured the form his gratitude would take. Together, again, in each other's arms . . .

I'm too much of a romantic, she told herself with a shake, filling a heavy silver tray with champagne glasses in the kitchen that evening. Why do I always see things as I wish them to be rather than what they are? It's time to put away romantic dreams and face reality. She fingered the lovely delicate crystal glasses. If nothing else, I'm way out of his class. The wealth on the tray alone represented a gulf too wide to bridge and she wouldn't let herself forget it.

Her feet were solidly on the ground when she entered the drawing room and unobtrusively made her way among Emma's guests.

Jason sat in his wheelchair, greeting his friends and neighbours with all the open charm she remembered so well, but never

thought to see again. He had smiled like that at her mother and even, after a brief meeting with them, had all her brothers accepting him into the family wholeheartedly. Of all of them, her father alone withheld his approval, saying he needed more time to get to know him. She gave a short sigh, wishing she had had his wisdom. It would have saved her so much heartache.

Jason was impeccably dressed in tailored black trousers cut to emphasise his deceptively lean length. A white frilled shirt and dark tie stretched across the wide powerful expanse of his chest when he slid his hands into the pockets of his black velvet dinner jacket. He sat easily, smiling, accepting the well-meant wishes offered to him now that his cousin was no longer under his guardianship.

'Yes, Emma's on her own now,' she heard him say as he grinned boyishly at a plump woman in purple silk standing in front of him with her arm around Emma's waist. 'She told me I wasn't so bad a guardian, but I expect she's glad not to have to answer to me any more.'

'Jason! You make it sound as if I've been in scrape after scrape. You know I've been a model of good behaviour since coming to stay with you.' She stamped her foot, making her sophisticated evening gown shimmer. Made of shining gold silk, it was artfully cut to fall from one shoulder, revealing the delicate lines of her gently curving figure. 'Mrs Meredith is going to get the wrong impression if you keep this up.'

His eyes narrowed and then he must have remembered Mrs Meredith's son, Scott, a brash young man who had sent Emma an enormous bouquet of long-stemmed red roses that afternoon.

'Yes, you have been a model of exemplary behaviour,' he nodded, still smiling, his teeth a bright white slash in his handsome face. He spoke to Emma but his eyes searched the room before they found Kristen's and held. 'You've graced this house in such a way no other woman could hope to match.'

'What a nice thing to say!' Mrs Meredith chuckled, beaming at Emma as if she was granting her some unspoken approval.

'Thank you for being so gallant, Jason,' Emma smiled coolly. She didn't realise he had really meant it for Kristen.

Flustered, Kristen turned away quickly, nearly upsetting the long-stemmed glasses on the tray as she fought to control an embarrassed heat running through her. I dreamed of being lady of the manor all those years ago, she thought with a lump in her throat. But I'm not. I never could be.

Surreptitiously watching Emma all evening, she knew she was right. Emma was scintillating, always making sure her guests were comfortable, parrying their open admiration with artless charm, flitting from group to group with brilliant smiles and graceful dignity. Compared to her, Kristen's mouth twisted, there could be no comparison. Emma was born to this kind of life. Kristen could only observe. In her elegant sophisticated gown, Emma was in her element here while Kristen, in a long black velvet skirt and antique-looking white lace blouse, was merely the hired help.

Soft music came from a stereo unit at one end of the glittering room filled with small genial knots of elegantly dressed people. Not only were there neighbouring farmers, but many wealthy businessmen had come from as far away as Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, men who had helped Jason when he had first decided to renovate this house. There were the women, too, from the

historical society who had given him immeasurable help in selecting fabrics and furnishings as well as wall coverings. All of them had jumped at this invitation to be included again in this charmed circle.

No matter how she tried, Kristen knew she didn't belong here. It made her silent and more than a little self-conscious.

'Where's the girl with the champagne?' Jason's deep voice ran through her. At once she stiffened her spine and crossed the room to him, keeping her face blank, holding out the tray filled with glasses, her eyes suitably downcast.

But nothing happened. He didn't take a glass as she expected him to. When she lifted her head, she was caught by the bleakness in his eyes. And there was something else, too. Something she couldn't define. She searched his face for long minutes as everything about her receded. She was conscious only of the pounding of her heart and the way it twisted into a painful knot in the middle of her throat.

'Kris—'

I've done something wrong, she thought, turning swiftly, heading for the kitchen. *But what?* The room spun sickeningly before her arm was caught in someone's warm firm grasp.

'Are you all right?' David asked, taking the tray from her and handing it to James who was standing near them.

'Of course.' She pulled herself together, smiling brightly, trying to crush the rising feeling of panic. 'It's just a little warm in here, isn't it?'

'Come out in the hall, then.'

'I'm sure I'm needed in the kitchen.' She ran a hand across her eyes and hurriedly looked around to make sure she wasn't causing a scene. That would have been unforgivable. When she glanced in Jason's direction, she stiffened, flushing with mortified colour. He was watching her and his expression changed from bleakness into flaring anger.

David followed her gaze then took her hand and pulled her towards the door, deliberately ignoring Jason's killing look. 'It's not so hot out here.'

Stumbling slightly, she followed him but she couldn't drag her eyes away from Jason's face.

'Now, what happened?' David closed the door behind them and stood with his arms folded across his chest. Dressed in a dark suit, he seemed as unapproachable as Jason.

'Nothing.'

'Don't tell me that. Did Jason say something, do something to hurt you?'

'No, David, not at all. I—I just felt faint for a minute, that's all. It's warm in there and—I'm dressed far too ...' Her voice trailed off and she looked down at herself helplessly, feeling so inadequate.

'...far too beautifully,' he finished softly.

Her eyes stayed down, huge and darkly green. Her hair had slipped out of the smooth coil on top of her head and trailed about her shoulders. 'I don't belong here!'

'Jason wouldn't say that!' His voice shook and he turned his face away from her, gripping the side of the door with his bunched fist.

'I don't know what happened between you two last night, but he's going to go ahead with therapy. That's the most important thing right now. Don't let your mistaken feelings of inferiority get in the way now.'

'How do you know I feel inferior?'

'I'm not blind, Kris.' She looked up, startled by the vehemence in his voice and was caught by the raw pain in his eyes. 'You're one in a million. You weren't born to this kind of life but any man—rich or poor—would be privileged to have you for his wife!' He took both her small cold hands in his and with his face close to hers, looked deeply into her eyes. 'I know you love him. Let that love overcome your pride—and his—or it will be the biggest waste—'

'If you have to do that sort of thing, would you mind finding a less public place for it?' Jason's shattered voice intruded like a blast of icy wind.

Kristen guiltily broke away from David and looked to where he sat in the doorway. His face was cold and hard and condemning and his hands were clenched on the arms of his chair. Every rigid line in his taut body shouted his resentment at seeing her there with the man who was once his best friend.

'Jason, I—'

'Don't bother to explain, Kris. I understand perfectly.' All the fight seemed to drain out of him. 'I remember telling you myself to find a whole man, a man who—'

'Jason!' A bright red stain ran into her face.

'You're blind as well as disabled,' David said harshly, standing with his feet planted wide, his hands curling into fists at his sides. 'Do you think she can see me when you're around?'

Jason half rose out of his chair, balancing himself on his trembling arms. His face white. 'You did it to me with Judith. Why shouldn't I think you'll try to take Kris, too?'

David stared at him for a long moment before forcing himself to relax his hands and shift his weight to an easier stance. 'Judith didn't love you, Jason. That's where they differ. You don't deserve it, but Kris loves you.'

Jason threw his head back haughtily and winced as he propelled his chair away from them. He didn't want to hear it. 'If you'll both excuse me . . .'

Arrogance surrounded him as he painfully made his own way to his rooms on the other side of the house and Kristen could only look at David helplessly and shake her head.

Curiously enough, it was Jason's arrogance that helped him through the first most difficult weeks of progressive therapy. More than once she watched him sink his teeth into his shaking lips rather than let any sound of pain pass them. Every day he pushed himself to the limits of his endurance and it was all she could do to force herself to stand there, helping James go through the motions, offering him her silent encouragement.

Sweat beaded Jason's face and the taut cords in his neck quivered when he forced the flaccid muscles in his legs to respond to his will. He was sprawled on his back on a mat on the floor of the small room that had once been used for storage. He wore only dark

bathing trunks and she turned her face away from the atrophied muscles in his legs.

'That's all for today, sir,' James said quietly at a look from Kristen. 'I'll get your clothes.'

'Is it getting to be too much for you, Kris?' Jason bit out, wiping his face with a towel before James left the room. He rested his head against the mat in a moment of weakness, his breath coming in short gasping spurts, but his eyes never left her slim figure kneeling beside him.

It was getting more and more difficult to keep everything in perspective. Each day when she saw him like this, the muscular length and breadth of his body make her knees weak and caused a fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach. She wanted to touch him, to smooth away the tension in his warm rippling flesh, to glory in the feel of his sinewy length . . .

'You're pushing yourself too hard,' she said, lifting her chin, forcing herself to think other less dangerous thoughts. 'If you expect results, you've got to take it slow, in easy stages, otherwise you'll undo all the good you've already accomplished.'

'Were you able to do that?'

A faint smile touched her lips. 'No. But then, I was a lot younger. My impatience wasn't tempered with wisdom.'

'And mine should be?'

'Why are you in such a hurry, Jason?' She trembled, smoothing her hands down the sides of her jeans.

'Have you forgotten? Martha gets her cast off tomorrow.'

Her eyes widened. 'It's been six weeks already?'

'You mean you haven't been counting the days?'

She looked blank.

'Don't you still intend to leave me tomorrow?'

She started to get to her feet but he reached out and grabbed her wrist, keeping her beside him. 'I—I must have lost track of the time,' she said with a funny catch in her throat. Was this his way of telling her he didn't need her help any more?

'Stay with me, Kris.'

'But you're through for today,' she said shakily, deliberately misunderstanding. She had to get away from him to think what she should do. 'You've done all your exercises and James went to bring you a change of clothes.'

'That's not what I mean and you know it.' His eyes darkened. 'You said when Martha's cast came off, you were leaving.'

'I did say that, didn't I?' She hunched her shoulders.

'I'm asking you to stay.'

'In what capacity? If Aunt Martha goes back to being your housekeeper, there won't be any place here for me.'

'Can't you just stay?'

'Are you asking me to live with you?'

When she said it, she meant it as a joke to ease the tension, to give her time to sort out her conflicting feelings of compassion and love

and pride and the knowledge that he really didn't need her now that he was progressing so well. He had James. She was just in the way, really. But then she saw that he was actually considering it and her eyes widened.

'Can't you just be a friend of mine who's come to stay?' he said roughly.

Thin trickles of ice trembled up and down her spine. 'A friend? You want me to be your friend?'

That's what her love was going to be reduced to? Their eyes locked together for long silent minutes and then something died inside her. Why should she be surprised? Her love probably was an embarrassment to him. He was a wealthy British lord. She was an ordinary working girl. His eyes were deeply grey, striking, vital, but only a curious emptiness struck at her.

'Is such a think possible between us, Kris?'

Her shoulders began to sag in defeat but she pulled herself together at once and put a smile on her white face. 'Turn over, *friend*. I'll massage those strained muscles until James comes back.'

In her agitation she didn't notice how easily he turned, without a flicker of the pain he had had only a week before. Her mind was on her own sense of loss and desolation as she poured a small amount of oil in her hands and rubbed them together to warm it before spreading it on to the sinewy strength of his protesting muscles. Her hands trembled when she touched the small of his back and she had to force herself to knead his flesh rather than mindlessly caress him.

'Thanks, Kris,' he murmured. 'I don't know what I'd do without you.'

Tears thickened in her throat, nearly cutting off her words, but he didn't seem to notice. 'That's all right,' she said. 'After all, what are friends for?'

When Martha resumed her position as housekeeper, Kristen's status in Jason's house went unquestioned by everyone but herself. As each day passed she felt more and more out of place. No longer was she allowed to do housework of any kind. If one of the maids didn't stop her, Aunt Martha did. Jason hired more servants and Kristen felt overwhelmed by their efficiency. She tried to convince herself it wasn't because she had botched the job and now he had to hire all these people to run his home right. But the feeling was there, nagging her.

David continued to look after Aunt Martha's farm and Emma continued to care for his son, always taking Steven with her on her daily shopping sprees or when visiting the neighbours. When the weather was decent, they played outside with the dogs and went riding on horseback with Steven perched in the saddle in front of Emma. Only Kristen was left alone with nothing to do after Jason's therapy sessions each day.

She wandered through the house confronted by his wealth everywhere she looked. All those years ago when she had dreamed of living in this house, she had pictured herself as being the happy lady of the manor. How much more inviting the dream than the reality! There was nothing here to give meaning to her life. Living on the fringes of wealth didn't really make her happy. Only Jason could do that. And he wasn't hers any more. He never had been.

She stood at the library window early one evening, watching the watery April sun sinking on the cloudy horizon. It's going to rain

tonight, she thought miserably, before catching sight of Steven playing on the lawn with Shaggy and Jason's big black dog who was still not allowed inside the house. Then she saw Alan and James taking a break near the stables. Watching them, she sighed. It was like being an outsider, watching a happy family but not being part of it.

'Is something the matter, Kris?' David asked quietly, coming to the window beside her. 'You look so sad standing here.'

She blinked up at his tall bulk in a dark well-cut suit, then quickly turned her face away from him, trying to compose herself. 'I—I was just thinking.'

'Unhappy thoughts?'

She shook her head, her bright gold hair tumbling down the back of her silky midnight-blue gown.

'I know you better than that.'

She turned back to him and managed to smile self-consciously. 'You look nice tonight. Is that a new suit? You look like you're dressed for a celebration instead of just for dinner.'

'Changing the subject?' he said softly.

She bit her lip. 'You've got such broad shoulders, if we keep on the subject I'll be crying all over them.'

'And you wouldn't want that?'

'Self pity is for the weak.' She twisted her hands together before switching on a small lamp and stepping to the fireplace where a

cheerful fire was lit more for its atmosphere than its warmth. 'You're not usually this early for dinner. Is everything all right?'

A slow smile deepened the grooves in his face. 'Haven't you noticed? I've been selling off the stock for your aunt these past few weeks. She finally gave in and sold her land. This morning she closed the deal and as of five o'clock today, I'm out of a job.'

Stunned, she looked up at him. 'I didn't realise—'

'Surely it can't be that much of a surprise?'

She shook her head in a daze. 'Aunt Martha's been talking about it in her round about way, but I thought it was a long way off yet.' Then another thought hit her. 'What will you do now?'

'I'm going back to Cornwall. I've a bit of land on the coast. Maybe I can find what I'm looking for there.' He stepped closer and lightly put his hands on her shoulders. 'I've got plane tickets for Steven and me for tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow! But nobody said anything. David, you can't go!' She caught herself beginning to sound like Emma and swallowed hard. 'You're not taking Emma with you?'

'She has things to do and places to go before she's ready to settle down. Right now Cornwall's not the place for her. It may never be.'

'Oh, David, if you leave what will I do? Who will I have to talk to?'

He frowned. 'You have Jason.'

She gripped his hands and looked up at him searchingly. 'No, I don't. He wants me for a friend. It's finally sunk in. That's all I can ever be to him.'

He shook her gently. 'You've got to make him see how much more you are.'

'I can't.'

'You've got to, Kris. Haven't you heard love is blind? Jason is blinder than most.'

'Oh, David. Why does it have to be him? Why couldn't I fall in love with you?'

He smiled the saddest smile she had ever seen. 'There's never a choice when it comes to love. You know that.'

A whimper escaped her and finally she gave in to the temptation of the inviting expanse of his chest. Slow tears dampened his shirt front but he didn't seem to notice. His arms crept around her warmly, comfortingly, and one of his big hands gently cradled her head against him.

'Jason loves you, Kris. He hasn't any choice in the matter, either.'

'No. He wanted me once,' she hiccupped into his shirt. 'He said he needed me to help him exercise until he could walk again. But love?'

He put a finger under her chin to study her tearwashed face. 'You've got to believe it. He's a complex person, proud and hurt. He's only trying to protect himself from being hurt again. Love him, Kris, and show him your love is all the protection he needs.'

'It wouldn't work.' She dug her fingers into the sleeves of his jacket, crushing the material. 'If you're leaving tomorrow, I'm going home too. I've stayed too long where I don't belong. Jason doesn't need me any more.'

'You can't just abandon him.'

'He's got his own life to live and there's no place in it for me. I won't stay and be an embarrassment to him, waiting for him to ask me to leave.' A pain like a knife plunged into her heart but she straightened her backbone and gave him a wretched travesty of a smile. 'Maybe I'll even get over him.'

His bright blue eyes glittered as he held her lightly in the circle of his powerful arms, roaming over her flushed face. Then he was crushing her slender body to his, burying his face in her shining gold hair and for a long time he didn't say anything. He just held her there, absorbing her trembling shudders.

When he did speak, his voice was warm and rich with feeling. 'Would you care to come to Cornwall with me? It would be a simple life. I wouldn't have a home like this to offer you but I'd try to make you happy.'

'David—'

A sudden splintering crash cut the words off in her throat and they both started guiltily, looking to where Jason stood, several feet away from them, his colourless face twisted with rage, a pair of wooden crutches clattering on the floor on either side of him.

CHAPTER NINE

'Is this how you took Judith away from me; too?' Jason said savagely, the light from the fire dancing over his twisted features making him look satanic. 'With promises of simple things I wouldn't think of offering her?'

'You're wrong, Jason. I never took Judith away from you,' David said quietly. 'Just as I could never take Kris away from you.'

'Liar! I heard you ask her to go with you and I won't have it! When you leave in the morning, you'll take no one else but your son.' He sneered at him, full of menace.

David dropped his hands to his sides and took several steps forward, looking Jason straight in the eye. 'Don't.' His voice was dangerously quiet and low, his big hands bunching into powerful knotted fists. 'Cripple or no cripple, you don't have to use that tone of voice.'

'But I'm not a cripple any more. I'm standing on my own two feet and I'm telling you, you and your son can leave. Kris stays with me until I'm finished with her.'

'And if she doesn't want to stay?'

'She's mine, David. She stays.'

David flicked a look back at her. 'You have a choice, Kris. No matter what he says. What's it going to be? Do you stay with him or do you go with me?'

She gripped her hands together convulsively, looking from one to the other, her face absolutely white. There could be no choice. He

knew that. Jason was so vital and strong and proud, unbending in his arrogance and, as senseless as it was, she loved him.

David was every bit as vital and strong and proud as Jason, she knew now. But his character was set in a different mould. She wished she could love him but it wasn't there and it couldn't be forced.

Her heart told her to stay. Jason might need her. She could see how unsteady he was on his feet. He was standing alone, unaided, but he had yet to take a step, and somehow she doubted he could do it without his crutches. Yet her mind told her to go. He'd come a long way in a short time with his therapy, and all that was left now was for James to see that he continued to progress. It wouldn't be long before he might walk normally. And then what? He said he wanted her to stay until he was finished with her. Could she bear to hear him tell her to go? Again?

'No. Don't say it,' Jason said thickly. 'Just go with him.' Wincing with pain, he turned his haggard face away.

'You fool!' David put out his hand to stop Kris from running blindly out of the room. 'She doesn't want to go with me. If you'd waited another minute to let us know you were listening, you'd have heard her tell me she couldn't come to Cornwall. She has no pride where you're concerned, Jason, That's why she lets you walk all over her. You don't deserve someone like Kris.'

'And you do, I suppose?'

'At least I wouldn't mistreat her.'

'Mistreat her?' His voice quivered with suppressed rage. 'There's a whole staff of servants here. The house is overrun with them. I've

done everything I could to make her life here easy. She doesn't have to lift a finger.'

'She's not Judith,' David said softly, dangerously. 'That was your first mistake: treating her as if she was Judith. Kris doesn't like to be idle. Can't you see that?'

Jason looked at her as if seeing her, really seeing her, for the first time. She stood at David's side, her eyes enormous with pain in her stricken face, her hands gripped tightly together in front of her, her stance stiff and still, almost regally so.

'Your second mistake,' he went on, 'was in not telling her—every day—you love her. She thinks you don't, you know.'

All of a sudden the rage was gone from Jason's face. His eyes became unreadable like molten silver as he stood there, swaying slightly, watching her.

The blood drummed noisily in her ears and her breathing became swift and shallow. She knew as well as he did how impossible it was. But still, a wanton longing gripped her. She wanted to go to him, to throw herself into his arms and pretend he was just an ordinary man, not a British lord.

'Why can't you say it?' David exploded. 'Are you afraid to tell her you love her? Did Judith hurt you that much?'

'You ask me that!' he sneered. 'Everyone knew how Judith loved me—from the time we were children. Yet you found it so easy to take her away from me. She loved me yet she let you come between us.'

'She never loved you!' David's teeth clenched and his face contorted with pain, but his voice had the choking softness of a

dying man. 'And if you're honest with yourself, you didn't love her either. Not the way it should have been. Not the way you love Kris.'

Jason's body jerked as if an electric current ran through him, shocking him into stillness and for a long quivering moment there was dead silence.

'Swallow your pride, Jason. Unbend. Tell her how much she means to you or by God, I will take her away from you!'

'You wouldn't dare.'

'Oh, wouldn't I?' he said huskily, his eyes suddenly alive with fire as they ran over her slender frame. 'She loves you, Jason, but I could try to make her love me.'

'She's mine!' His harsh voice rang out. 'She'll stay mine. I'll never let her go. How could I?'

'Don't tell me. Tell her.'

Jason turned his head to face Kristen but, suddenly he stiffened with a sudden jerk.

Behind her, Emma stood half-hidden behind a wing chair, still dressed in her riding habit, its blue velvet hopelessly crushed. Her usually perfect red-gold hair was mussed and her face had a long crease on one cheek where she had obviously fallen asleep leaning against the corner of the chair.

'This seems to be the room for eavesdroppers,' Jason muttered raggedly.

'I'm sorry.' Emma was apologetic as she shifted from one foot to the other in embarrassment. 'I fell asleep in the chair. You woke me up when you dropped those crutches.' She looked at them now on the floor and gave him a hesitant, placating smile. 'I'm glad you're better, Jason,' she said softly, crossing to him, giving him a swift light kiss on the cheek before picking up the crutches and helping him position them under his arms. Then she turned to David. 'I didn't really mean to listen, but none of you saw me when I stood up and—and besides, after some of the things you said, I was curious.'

His face darkened. 'Forget it, Emma.'

'I can't,' she whispered. 'I thought I knew what it was like to be loved but after listening to all of you, I see now I was wrong. I've never really felt things except with surface emotions. I've never loved deeply the way all of you have.' She looked at Kris and smiled sadly. 'I know you think you don't belong here but you're wrong, Kris. You're more of a lady than a lot of them back home.'

A flicker of surprise ran across David's face. This was a side to Emma he'd never seen before. He moved swiftly to where Jason was still standing, balancing himself on his crutches and held out his hand. 'Goodbye, Jason,' he said quietly, gripping his hand hard. 'I won't impose on your hospitality any longer. You've got this chance with Kris. I hope you make the most of it.'

He turned to Kris and took both her hands gently in his, stooping to drop a chaste kiss on her forehead. 'You would have liked Cornwall,' he said with a slight smile of regret grooving the corners of his mouth.

Then he turned to Emma and dropped a brotherly arm across her shoulders. 'It's time we tactfully withdraw and let them work out

the rest of it for themselves. How about helping me find Steven? The last time I saw him he was in the stables with James and Alan and the dogs.'

Emma easily slipped her arm around his waist and left the room without a backward glance.

Everything was still. The only sound that reached Kristen's ears was the faint hiss of logs burning in the fireplace as she stood stiffly facing Jason. Her breath made a low strangling sound in her throat when she realised she was holding it and then it slowly whistled out.

'You must have loved Judith very much,' she managed to whisper.

He laughed without mirth and dragged himself to the fire where he balanced precariously on his crutches. 'At one time I thought the sun rose and set on her. When she walked out on me and married David, I could have killed her.' His faced darkened. 'It wasn't until tonight that I realised her leaving me wasn't really a blow to my heart. I was too blind to see. She hurt my ego, my damned pride, that's all it was.' He threw his head back and laughed again. 'I never loved her and I spent all this time hating my best friend because I thought I did.'

His face twisted. It was a painful revelation and not one a man of his arrogance could easily accept. There was defeat in his broad shoulders as he slumped forward awkwardly.

Kristen hated having to stand here witnessing his humiliation. It tore at her heart to see him humbled like this. It was almost an invasion of his privacy and she was sure he wouldn't thank her for it.

Silently, she retreated and she was almost to the door when his harsh voice stopped her.

'Are you going with David after all?'

She tensed but didn't turn around. 'No, Jason. It's time I went home.'

'Alone?'

'If you mean, am I taking Aunt Martha with me, then no. She's happy here.'

'And you're not.'

She turned and faced him, the width of the room between them. 'No, Jason, I'm not. Despite what Emma said, I don't belong in your world. I never did.'

'But you love me!'

Her composure was unshakeable. 'Yes. I love you. I will always love you. But you don't love me. That's the difference.'

'What makes you think that?' he choked, his mouth twisting with unutterable pain. 'What have I done?'

'You started out by lying to me. You told me Emma was your wife. I didn't mean enough to you to share the very worst time of your life.'

Jason looked at her in astonishment and slowly straightened on his crutches. 'You can't mean what you're saying.'

She was shaking now, livid. 'I mean every single word.'

'If you loved me enough to want to share this,' he gestured to his crutches, 'why won't you stay now when I'm almost able to walk again, and share my house? There's everything you could ever want here.'

She stood in the beautiful gracious room with its massive proportions, its leather-bound books and costly furniture and a slight shudder passed through her. He had told her once long ago she didn't belong here. How could he expect her simply to take all this for granted the way he did? She was merely a friend who loved him. This was home to him but it could never be home to her.

'You're very rich, aren't you?' she said softly.

'Does it bother you?'

'You never told me—when we first met, I mean.'

His eyes narrowed. 'Would it have made a difference?'

She let out a sigh of total defeat. 'No, I suppose not. I didn't choose to love you. It just happened, that's all. If you'd been a poor man, I'd have loved you just the same.'

'But you'd regret it?'

'Of course I'd regret it. Because you can't love me back. *Friends*, you said.' Tears shimmered in her eyes and she burned with shame and humiliation at this sign of weakness.

'So stay with me and become something more.'

Her back stiffened with pride. 'No, Jason. It wouldn't work. I'm leaving. I've stayed too long as it is.'

'Just like that?' He awkwardly dragged himself across the room to stand in front of her. Sweat beaded his upper lip and he was trembling. 'But you love me,' he said. 'You love me!' angrily this time, as if he'd like to take her and shake some sense into her.

'That love doesn't give you the right to hurt me any more. Oh no, friends,' she choked on the word, 'don't do that to each other. You're the wealthy lord of the manor but I've got my pride, too. You once told me I didn't belong here. I didn't want to believe it but you were right. I've never forgotten it.'

Without giving him a chance to say anything more, she turned on her heel and fled. She had to end it. Now. She wouldn't stay and break down completely in front of him. Her heart was broken, shattered beyond repair this time.

But he wouldn't let it end there. He followed her, swearing impatiently under his breath as he dragged himself through the carved doorway with painful unco-ordinated movements. In his haste, he slipped on the polished floor and his crutches went scattering in different directions and he fell flat on his face, cracking his head on the marble floor with a loud thud before lying in the hall in a broken heap.

'Jason!' She stopped her mad flight and turned back, running to him, her gown swirling out in a large blue circle as she dropped to her knees. 'Jason! Are you all right?'

His face was deathly pale, beaded with moisture. 'Don't. . . leave me. You can't. . .' his voice trailed off as he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER TEN

THERE were many times in the next three days when Kristen relived those last few moments with Jason, kneeling helplessly beside him, murmuring words of encouragement while James phoned for an ambulance. He had been unconscious but she felt that somehow he must hear her and be comforted.

But now, as she stood beside the high narrow hospital bed with its metal railings raised to protect him, she doubted the wisdom of her actions. She had no right to stay and do what she had done.

His long powerful body was oddly still, covered with a white blanket and his handsome face was no longer etched with familiar lines of pain. It was sickly white, even his lips, making the midnight black of his hair a vivid splash against the pale sheets.

When he regained consciousness she was sure he wouldn't thank her. She gripped the railing beside him with shaking, sweating hands and stared at him, willing him to waken yet dreading it at the same time. What if it hadn't worked? She wasn't by nature a gambler but this time she had gambled with Jason's life.

It had been so easy to convince herself she was doing the right thing in the confusion of the emergency room. The doctors and nurses attending him had taken it for granted that she was his wife and had her sign a consent form for surgery. James had stood at her side, silent and reassuring, and when they were alone in the dim little surgical lounge waiting for word, he had squeezed her hand and nodded his head.

'I'm sure we did the right thing, miss,' he said softly. 'He was always so stubborn in his refusal. He never listened to reason when the doctors told him there was a slim chance he'd walk if he'd let

them operate again. He only thought of the possibility of further paralysis. "Better the devil you know", he'd say. We took the decision out of his hands, that's all.'

She flashed him a strained smile and silently thanked him for his inclusion in the deception. All he would have had to do was tell the nurse she was not Mrs Jason Caine and there would have been no question of surgery until he regained consciousness. But one young intern mentioned internal bleeding and she had thrown caution to the winds.

A loud splintering against the windows forced her concentration away from Jason for a moment. It was raining again, the third straight day, but as she watched it trickle down the glass her mouth reluctantly curved in a sad smile. It was in just such a rain as this that Jason had proposed to her more than a year ago. He had looked so young and boyish at the time with the rain dripping from his hair down his nose and on to his lips. She could still taste the salt of it as he kept her firmly locked in his arms and watched the drops pummel her face before he blotted it out with his. His kisses were deep and drugging and she was only conscious of rainbows then. Would there ever come a time when she could look at rain and not remember?

A small sigh escaped her before she looked down again at Jason and froze.

He lay quite still looking up at her with eyes as darkly grey as the rain-soaked sky outside. 'You stayed,' he said softly, wonderingly, his eyes devouring hers.

'How do you feel?' she choked.

'My back doesn't hurt any more.' He looked surprised for a moment then looked past her to the small sterile hospital room. 'How did I get here?'

'James and David brought you.'

'David?'

'He couldn't leave without knowing you were all right. He comes every day to see you.'

'How long have I been here?.'

She bit her lip and watched his face intently. 'Three days.'

'I've been out of it that long?' He relaxed a little and stared up at the ceiling, blinking back his confusion.

She took a deep breath and plunged on, deciding to tell him everything. 'You've been through a lot in that short time. You've had surgery, Jason. The doctor thought it was a success but he couldn't be sure until you were conscious again. I'd better tell the nurse you're awake.'

'Wait.' He put out a restraining hand to stop her. 'How could they do surgery? I never would sign a consent form.'

'I signed it,' she said nervously, choking back a sudden sob. 'I know it was presumptuous of me but you were unconscious and the doctors said there was pressure on the spinal cord. I had to take a chance.'

'You signed it?'

'I pretended to be your wife.'

He closed his eyes then blinked them open again, smiling for the first time. 'Your father isn't going to like that. He said I couldn't ask you again to marry me until I could stand on my own two feet.'

'My *father*?' She looked stunned.

'I've had several long talks with him on the phone. The last one was just before I found you in the library with David. That's why I was on those blasted crutches. I had to stand upright and I knew David was leaving, and I had to work fast or he'd take you away with him.'

'What did my father say to you?' Her legs buckled and she sank down weakly on to a chair beside the bed. This was too much for her.

'I explained that I was this "lordship" you and Martha have been writing to him about. Up until a few weeks ago I hadn't realised Martha never used my name, only that pompous title. I suspected you were doing the same.'

Her head dipped forward but she didn't say anything.

'I told him how I had asked you to stay to help me so that when I could walk again I could ask you to marry me.'

Her eyes flew to his face. 'What did he say?'

'Your father didn't pull any punches. He told me in no uncertain terms what a rotten, no-good . . .' He smiled wryly. 'I'm sure you get the picture.'

She kept her eyes riveted to his white smile and hardly dared to breathe.

'I told him I wanted to spend the rest of my life making it up to you, Kris. But he said he thought I'd taken advantage of your generosity long enough and I should stand on my own two feet and have something more than money and a title to offer you before I dared ask you again to be my wife.'

She sat absolutely still, little feathers of apprehension trembling up and down her spine, and watched him sit up.

'No pain,' he said in a voice faint with wonder. 'Put the railing down, will you?'

She jerked to her feet at once. 'You shouldn't. I'll get the nurse.'

'No.' His hands shook as he struggled with the rail. 'I've got to try and I'd rather not have an audience.'

'You shouldn't.'

'I've got to. Please!'

Against her better judgement, she lowered the metal rail and watched him swing his legs over the side. He sat for a minute, fighting waves of dizziness, then he clenched his jaw and stood erect on the cold floor, his open-backed hospital gown nearly falling off his powerful frame.

'No pain!' he shouted, incredulous.

Tears stood in her eyes but she couldn't look away from him. He stood alone, his shoulders flexed, his head high, his back straight. Then he took a halting step. Another. And another. And then another before he roughly swept her up into his arms.

'Thank you,' he said humbly, crushing her into his lean warm length, shuddering convulsively. 'I might not have done it on my own.'

She buried her face in his chest, her heart thudding against his, her arms around his back absorbing the convulsive movements of his body, and sent up a silent prayer of thanksgiving. So easily it could have gone the other way.

Then suddenly his voice rang out exultantly. 'I've waited so long to say it, Kris, but now you've made it possible again. Will you marry me?'

Shivers ran over her. Oh, how she wanted to! Her tears spilled over. To be his wife, to have the right to be with him always, to share his life and his love. Visions ran through her mind, of him and of her, of their children, walking, running, laughing.

But it couldn't be. He was on a totally different level. She couldn't ask him to come down to hers and she could never reach his. He was born to his life just as she was born to hers.

For a long moment there was no sound in the room except the rain beating against the windows. Then he loosened his long arms and stared down into her face. 'Kris?'

'I love you,' she said simply, her throat aching with all her unspoken despair. 'I think you'd better get back into bed and let me call the nurse.'

His fingers dug into her arms and his voice changed, became husky and uncertain. 'I know you love me but you haven't said yes.'

'Please, Jason—'

'Why?' He shook her angrily, increasing the pressure of his fingers.
'Why won't you marry me?'

'You're grateful right now but when the feeling wears off, we'll be right back where we started.'

He stared at her. 'What's wrong with that? It was love at first sight for both of us. You know that as well as I do. We'll have each other.'

'No!' She tried to twist out of his hold but he wouldn't let her go.
'You have me but I can never have you.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Please, Jason,' she choked.

'What do you want me to do? Tell me. I'll do anything to have you for my wife.'

'You can't love me!' she burst out, feeling sick as anguish began to grip her again. 'It's impossible. You're an earl. I'm just a simple, ordinary—'

He looked at her, stunned, his expression white with shock. 'My God, Kris. Is that what all this is about? Why you ran out on me at Emma's birthday party? Why you kept turning to David even though I knew you loved me? All this time I've been so concerned with why I couldn't marry you. I never thought there was a reason why you wouldn't marry me. God, Kris! You can't let that stop us!'

Her lips were stiff, her voice full of ache and longing and tears.
'You know I'm right. I have no business loving you. If we were in England—'

He held her away from him, roughly, his arms tightening on hers as he looked into her stricken face. His own was equally strained. 'That's one of the reasons I left. I have a title I don't want. It doesn't mean as much as it used to but there are times when it gets in the way. Some people never let you forget. They expect you to live up to a certain standard, behave a certain way. I came here to start over, to be free, to be an ordinary man.'

Her eyes rounded. 'But you're not ordinary, Jason, and you shouldn't try to be. People recognise that difference in you. Even your house—your lifestyle—'

Chagrin ran across his face. 'It never was my intention to actually live in that house. I came to this part of the country to see Judith, to make my peace with her before she died. But while I was here, I happened to see this ruined manor house. It reminded me so much of home—but it was more than that. I was—attracted to it. I don't know—I felt—drawn to it somehow. You—you probably won't understand, but I kept coming back to it, picturing how it would look if someone cared enough.' He shrugged helplessly before his eyes were caught by her faintly incredulous but eloquent look. Something stretched between them, a feeling that needed no words. And then he was there, walking around in her mind and she was in his and there were no more secrets from each other.

She started to smile in spite of herself and a little spark of joy travelled from him to her, starting a warm glow around her heart. Maybe, just maybe, it was possible after all. Icy shivers ran over her and she felt hot and cold at the same time.

Of course it's possible, he said without speaking. Our love makes anything possible.

A tremor ran through him and his eyes were deep bottomless pools of emotion. 'Be my wife and live with me there. You dreamed it once, I know you did. Let me make all your dreams come true.' He gathered her up against him once more with a fierceness that surprised her. 'There's no need to feel threatened by my wealth or by my title,' he said exultantly. 'You belong to me as I belong to you. Even before we met. You know that as well as I do. My pride tried to come between us but you wouldn't let it. I won't let your pride stand in the way now.'

A lump lodged in her throat. 'I never realised that was what I was doing.'

'Oh God, Kris,' he groaned, 'Can't you see it? I'm just a man who wants to love you and care for you and try to give you back some of the joy you've given me. I've taken so much. You've given it freely. Yet there's still more—and I want it all! Let my love overcome your pride. I swear you'll never regret it.'

All her despair and fear and uncertainty left in a rush, and relief, mingling with a warm curling emotion, flooded through her. Together they could face anything. There was no room for pride.

'Say you'll marry me,' he said unsteadily.

She didn't hesitate. 'Oh, yes, darling, yes! I—'

But he didn't give her a chance to tell him she loved him again. She was crushed in his arms, tightly welded to his long lean frame, his mouth eagerly opening over hers, swamping her with a warm rushing tide of love. All the obstacles were gone now. He was breathless and trembling when he finally came up for air.

'Oh Jason, I'm sorry—'

He put a silencing finger against her lips and leaned weakly back against the bed, keeping one arm around her. 'I'm shaky but I don't know if it's from being off my feet so long or from your kisses. I'd forgotten how potent they could be.'

Just then a short plump nurse walked in with a rustle of briskness and stopped abruptly, staring in shock. 'Mr Caine!'

'We were just about to call you and let you know I'm awake,' he said with a smile meant to beguile her.

From her sudden blush, he succeeded.

'I came to take your blood pressure,' she said briskly before looking knowingly at Kristen's glowing face. 'But I'd better wait a bit. It's probably sky-high from the looks of both of you and I don't think it has anything to do with your recent surgery. I'll let the doctor know you're awake and then come back in a few minutes.' She turned to the door then looked back over her shoulder. 'Take care that your husband doesn't get over-excited and undo all the good that was done,' she said quietly. 'It would be better if you got him back into bed.'

Kristen's heightened colour caused Jason no little amusement. 'My wife's been trying to get me back into bed these last fifteen minutes,' he grinned wickedly.

'Oh,' the nurse smiled back. 'Oh!' she said more forcefully when she realised it could be taken two ways. She took another look at Jason and then fled.

'Jason!' Kris admonished him.

'Help me back into bed, will you, my wife?' he said with all innocence.

Her eyes danced.

'Say it,' he said softly. 'I dare you.'

'If I really was your wife already, you know where I'd be!'

He eased himself beneath the covers and his laugh was young and boyish and full of mirth. 'Don't you think we'd scandalise the nurses?'

She scraped the toe of her shoe on the shiny tiled floor and kept her head down, the fall of her gold hair hiding her flaming face. 'When you get home, my love . . .'

'Our home, Kris. Not some stately manor house for a British lord and lady but a *home*. We'll make it live again, really live. And we'll fill it with our children.' He gripped her shoulders, gathering her against him, kissing her fiercely. 'A home where I'd have you in my bed and Martha would see we weren't disturbed for a week.'

'Only a week?' she murmured mindlessly into his neck, loving the frantic pounding of his pulse. 'Somehow I don't think that would shock Aunt Martha in the least. So you might as well do it right. Make it two weeks!'

'Oh, don't make this any more difficult for me than it already is,' he muttered hungrily, his hands roaming up and down her back. 'Just the thought of having to wait to get home and marry you—' He shook his head to clear it.

'I love you so much,' she sighed. 'We've waited this long, we can probably wait a few more days.'

'Do we have to wait for your parents and all your brothers and their families to get here for our wedding? That may take weeks!'

She laughed lightly. 'What an impatient man you are.'

'Impatient, arrogant, stupid, blind. I was all those things. Can you ever forgive me?'

'I read somewhere that a truly happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers. It's the beginning of love.'

'I'll have to remember that,' he said, his mouth gently caressing hers. 'Maybe in time I'll have learned all there is to know about it. Do you think you could stand to take the next fifty years to teach me? I'll have to get started, won't I?'

She blushed rosily and melted towards him. 'Only fifty years?'